

mere

malarkey



# Mere Malarkey

*Selected Nonfiction*

*Alan Good*

**Death of Print**

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Cover photo: the author as a child.  
Back cover: accidental skype screenshot.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .

—William Butler Yeats

I don't believe in writing tidy essays. Any essay I  
write is a huge mess just like me.

—Alan Good, on twitter, March 18, 2021



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This book would not exist without the Neutral Spaces blog. I also recently learned that on the first day of my parents' honeymoon in Branson, Missouri, the cabin they were staying in was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. So I guess this book also would not exist without my parents ignoring a pretty clear sign from heaven for long enough to bring me into the world.



Stupid

*Neutral Spaces*

February 3, 2021

God, about twenty-one years ago I guess I was walking my dog around the neighborhood. I had spent a few months in Colorado, working at Subway, then working at Wal-Mart, but I was back in Joplin for the summer. I never used to take the dog on a walk. I just decided to do it. What happened on this walk has stuck with me for so long, I've thought about it so many times and felt guilty about it because I did the wrong thing and got called out for it. My dog took a shit in somebody's yard and I hadn't brought any plastic bags to pick it up even though I had learned from living in Colorado that you're supposed to pick up the poop when you walk your dog. I had never seen anyone do this. It never occurred to me people would do this. This dude came out of his house and said "Hey, man, let your dog take a shit in your own yard next time." It was close to noon but this guy looked like he'd just got out of bed. He was scruffy and thin but muscular. He was wearing pajama pants and a wifebeater. Someone might email me or something to tell me I shouldn't say wifebeater, I should say A-shirt. That's fine and all but if you want wifebeater to disappear from the vernacular you really have to have something better than A-shirt to replace it with. This guy, to

you, might not seem that great, but to me in that moment he was unfathomably cool. He was just so nonchalant and easy-moving. He wasn't mad, he wasn't yelling, he was just telling me to let my dog take a shit in my own yard like he was my mentor. I never had a mentor. Every time I tried to have a mentor it just all went to shit. I was embarrassed, and I just said "Okay, sorry," and hurried away in shame, but in my head I thought, I've got to start wearing wifebeaters.

Whenever I do something stupid, which is more or less all the time, I think about my father, who once shot an arrow through his hand. He was shooting with his buddies. I think this was back when he lived in Stafford, Kansas, where I was born. They were drinking beers in the driveway, taking turns shooting at a target, with the garage door as a backstop. If I'm getting any details wrong it's because if I was even born yet I was a baby, and my dad told me this story a few years ago, and since I'm not writing this for *The New Yorker* I don't have to bug him for fact-checks. He missed the target and his arrow struck the garage door, and the next time he shot with that arrow it splintered on release and part of the shaft went through the webbing between his thumb and index finger. This essay started as a tweet. Like I said I'm kind of stupid. When my wife saw my tweet she replied "That's where all your stupid shit comes from." I've been thinking about my father a lot lately because I've moved back to Joplin.

We had planned to move to the farm. My grandpa's farm. When he died his three remaining children got it, and my mom handed her share over to me a couple years ago. This place has always had a hold on me. It's magic to me. I want to spend the rest of my life there. My wife and I talked about moving out there and building a house several years ago, but we finally decided not to because the schools are shit, but now I think we figure who knows when we'll send the kids back to school anyway so fuck it.

We were going to have a mobile home brought out, a nice one, 1,500 square feet, way bigger than our house in Denver, so we did a lot of work getting our site prepared. We rented an excavator and ran water and electric and installed a septic tank and three hundred feet of lateral lines. That's where the wastewater goes. After it's treated in the septic tank it flows out and filters into the soil through perforated pipe. The grass is always greenest over your lateral lines.

We'd call the mobile home place to check in and they'd tell us it should be two or three more weeks. We figured while we were waiting we'd build a garage. Spent weeks on that. We kept calling the mobile home place every week and it was always two or three more weeks. Finally we realized it was going to be more than two or three weeks, finally they told us they had no idea when it would be ready, because of covid, and we finally just canceled. On their website they said they were taking every precaution; when we went to their

office no one was even wearing a mask. Can't believe they all got it. So now we have water, electric, and septic, but no house. We're going to build it ourselves, my wife and me. We are stupid.

So that's how I'm back in Joplin, my hometown. We're renting a house right in my old neighborhood, one street over from the house I lived in when I was in high school. That house is still standing. The tornado just missed this neighborhood. This year is the tenth anniversary. Bad omen. My wife has started working and everyone has a story about the tornado. I wasn't here. I was living in Colorado. I'm writing this in early February but just last week there was a tornado warning. The sirens went off and my kids were so scared. There's no basement in the house we're renting. No shelter. Not even that last resort, an interior room away from windows. I stuffed some essentials in a backpack, car keys, laptop, raincoats, water bottles, a few granola bars, a pistol because we live in hell. We huddled in the little hallway outside the bathroom. Closed the bathroom door and the bedroom doors to block the windows. My kids were holding on to each other so tight. It was nice to see even though it was so sad. They fight over the stupidest things, which is hard for me to understand because I was an only child for a long time, had no one to play with or talk to or fight with except my dog and my imaginary friends, until my dad remarried and I got step-siblings, but I never fought with them. I

guess it's different. Oscar, who is five, said "I'll always remember you George, mom, dad, and Charlie." Fucking adorable. I wasn't scared. I'd been through this a million times growing up. I just kept thinking how stupid it was to come back here.

Our temporary house is also right down the street from the garage apartment where Bonnie and Clyde hid out from the cops for like twelve days until some upstanding citizen of Joplin ratted them out. Probably the most interesting thing that ever happened in this town.

In our little rental house we have a little folding table next to a window that overlooks the little porch. My kids sit here in the morning and with the light on they can see their reflections in the window and they like to pretend their reflections are their friends, who are out there on the porch copying them. Fucking adorable. I feel so bad for them, it's unfair the way their lives have been disrupted, by covid, by us. We're supposed to be living up at the farm right now. They were supposed to each have their own room right now. But they make everything normal. They're adaptable. They have such big hearts. I should be trying to teach them right now but I'm letting them play. It's George's birthday. His mom is at work but we let him open one of his presents before she left. He's putting together a new Lego set and his little brother is watching and playing with his own Legos and I'm using the time to write this stupid essay.

I do think it was the right thing, coming back. In the long run it will feel right but right now, a lot of the time, it feels stupid. Fuck it.

This neighborhood is dead. No one seems to live here. So many houses are empty. People don't go outside except to smoke. It's just me, walking among the ruins. It's fine that way because there's still a pandemic and I don't think it's ever going to get better and I don't want to see anyone anyway. I have a new dog. Charlie. He's a black lab and he's got this curly tail. Fucking adorable. I take him on walks three or four times a day because we don't have a fence. I walk past that house every day, my old mentor's house. I always hurry by because I'm afraid my dog will take a shit in that yard.



## The Bedbug Theodicy

*Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*

September 16, 2009

On August 4, 2008, I sat down with my girlfriend to enjoy a leisurely, late-morning breakfast of fried potatoes and strong coffee. We had returned the previous evening from a ten-day trip visiting family in Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. We enjoyed the visit but were happy to be back in Denver, where the weather was less oppressive. We took our breakfast on the living-room couch and discussed the trip, for much of which we were apart. I felt something crawling on my foot and casually brushed it off. I looked down and saw a brown insect crawling on the floor toward an old chest that served as a coffee table. I shoved the chest, blocked the bug's path with my foot, and grabbed a nearby hunting knife. My movement attracted Virginia's attention. She looked down and said, "Oh my God, it's a bedbug."

I squashed the bastard with the back of the blade, and she stood up, shaking, and said she felt something crawling up her leg. She pulled down her plaid pajama pants and flicked away another bedbug.

Unlike ticks, fleas, and other bloodsucking insects, bedbugs presently don't spread disease,

but their bites are irritating, and their presence leads to anxiety, insomnia, and nausea. They are brown parasites, comparable in size to apple seeds, that resemble miniature hand grenades. Bedbugs—or things, as Virginia calls them—are generally nocturnal but are sometimes (as in our case) active during the day. They hide in tiny crevices and can survive for several months, sometimes even more than a year, between meals, which can lead their human victims to a false sense of security and accomplishment. They are attracted by warmth and carbon dioxide and can feed on poultry or mice, but they prefer human blood, and they inject an anesthetic before drawing out blood in order to dine undetected.

Bedbugs, after a few quiet decades, are resurgent across the globe and can be found in homes, apartment buildings, college dorms, homeless shelters, and hotels, or anywhere humans spend time. Some experts attribute the recent increase in bedbug populations in part to the 1972 ban on the pesticide D.D.T., which could not discriminate between bedbugs and bald eagles. If bedbugs were the antagonists in a horror movie, this would be the sequel. We blanketed the earth in pesticides and believed the bastards dead, but they're back with a vengeance . . . and they're hungry for blood.

The most important thing to know about bedbugs is how to kill them, the cheapest way being, as illustrated earlier, the ruthless application

of force. A certain amount of therapy accompanies this method, as well as a high level of nausea.

After the initial tears and suicidal ideations, we called the building manager, and he came over and sprayed some kind of pesticide, although he probably should have waited until we had left. I generally oppose chemicals but was in no emotional state to object. We bagged all our clothes, and I called my mother, who drove down from the suburbs to collect us and our garbage bags. She drove us to a Laundromat near her house, and we spent more than \$50 and endured an uncomfortable conversation with a strange man who had recently seen a television program about bedbugs and seemed excited to encounter people with real field experience. (He had been eyeing us and eavesdropping on our conversation, and then someone let slip the keyword, which served, in his mind, as an introduction).

We spent the next two or three days, in a somewhat delirious state, at my mother's house. When we summoned the courage to return, we gutted our apartment. (My mother, an optimist, took the position that this was "an opportunity to de-clutter.") We threw out the torn sofa and the revolting old mattress, which someone stole and probably sold. We disemboweled all our desks and dressers and scrubbed and sanitized their insides and their drawers. We investigated natural methods of destroying or deterring bedbugs and proceeded to coat the floors and baseboards with Neem oil (it comes from the Neem tree, is used for

skin care, smells like peanuts, and is reported to repel bedbugs) and, when it arrived in the mail, diatomaceous earth, a white powder made from fossilized algae called diatoms. Diatomaceous earth is a desiccant; it kills bedbugs by dehydrating them but isn't supposed to be harmful to humans or pets, although breathing it is not pleasant. It's a grotesque pleasure to come across the crisp corpses.

Bedbugs can't survive extreme hot or cold temperatures. Even after the hours of laundry, there were several bags that hadn't been cleared, and there were other items, like backpacks and luggage, too cumbersome for a washing machine. We left them in the car for three hot days and found a couple dead bedbugs after this treatment. Three days may strike some as overkill; however, with bedbugs, as with vampires, mummies, and whatever Jason Voorhees is, there's no such thing as overkill.

Bedbugs are easy to kill but nearly impossible to eradicate because they are difficult to detect, which is why highly trained canines are useful. We were lucky to have found the bedbugs right away. We saw about fifteen bedbugs, most of them dead, over the next two weeks, and we would spend all our time wondering when the next one would show up to throw our lives again into turmoil. About two months after the first sighting, we arranged for a bedbug-sniffing dog to search our apartment, which came up clean. We felt a fragile peace.

Virginia works at a homeless shelter, which is a likely source of our invasion, although she has always been careful about not bringing them home. Our lives have changed. We bought a new bed and now store most of our clothes in plastic bins, even though they're against our environmental and aesthetic principles. We inspect our seats—sometimes with a red safety light for a bicycle—in the movie theater. I suffer from phantom itches, Virginia from Kafkaesque nightmares in which head-sized bedbugs, when stabbed, produce dozens of fist-sized bedbugs that can only be killed by fire. Almost a year later, the slightest breeze sets us scratching and searching our skin for bedbugs. (It doesn't help that she sees them at work every day.) She keeps asking me, "Do you think we'll ever be normal again?"

Bedbug victims who can't afford search dogs might never be certain of success. There will always be doubt, anxiety. Bedbugs, to me, indicate cosmic hostility. Either God doesn't exist, or God exists and hates us (or at least isn't fond of us). I cannot accept that a loving God would create a creature whose sole purpose is to feast on the flesh of his so-called children. I find inspiration in these lines from "The City of Dreadful Night" by James Thompson:

The vilest thing must be less vile than Thou  
From whom it had its being, God and Lord!

Virginia believes in God, and she believes God, who is loving and good, has a reason for everything he creates. This must include bedbugs, so one day she asked a priest who works at the shelter why bedbugs even exist. He answered that, while they probably have some sort of evolutionary function, they might just be here to annoy us.

Review of *The Animal Review: The Genius, Mediocrity, and Breathtaking Stupidity That Is Nature* by Jacob Lentz and Steve Nash

Bookslut

May 2010

Jacob Lentz and Steve Nash hate America. They also hate pandas, alpacas, and locusts. In their new book, *The Animal Review: The Genius, Mediocrity, and Breathtaking Stupidity That Is Nature*, which is not so much new as bound, Lentz, a writer for *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, and Nash, an advertising writer, examine and then grade various animals based on characteristics such as cuteness, usefulness, and “deadliosity.” The animals listed above all received Fs. I know the authors hate America because, in reviewing the North American mountain goat (Grade: B+/A-), they claim that most animals indigenous to this continent are lame: “Our eagles are bald, our trout are swimming at third-grade levels.” That quote goes on, but I can’t go with it. I’m reluctant to reveal their views on the bald eagle, which every red-blooded American knows deserves an A++; however, journalistic integrity compels me: “The bald eagle...is the entitled blue blood of Kingdom Animalia.” They agree that the bald eagle, due to “its terrifyingly sharp beak, long talons, stark yellow eyes against a bright white head, and a wingspan that can reach eight feet,... has style to spare,” but that’s not good enough for

these freedom-haters. Lentz and Nash (it doesn't have the ring of Sacco and Vanzetti) can't find anything physically or evolutionarily amiss with our national symbol, so they invent an attitude problem: "the fawning worship of an entire nuclear-armed nation went to its head, and soon not even its massive nests (the largest of any bird in North America) could hold its swelling ego." Treason!

*The Animal Review* is not an important book, but it is a book, as opposed to a blog, which it also is. (Look: [animalreview.wordpress.com](http://animalreview.wordpress.com).) Books based on blogs are popular these days. Books about things people did for a year are also popular. I'll call my blog *The Year of Living Drunkenly*. (I also considered *The Year of Being Regular*.) The climax will be when some top editor takes me out for a three-martini lunch and says, "A.G., baby, we want to do a *Drunkenly* book."

Somebody said something like that to Lentz and Nash, but mercifully I didn't have to read about it. There are good things about *The Animal Review*. It's at its best when its authors relate odd facts in humorous fashion: "Like all members of phylum Echinodermata, sea cucumbers have an endoskeleton just below the skin. Oh—and when threatened, many a sea cucumber will shoot its organs out of its anus."

There are some funny observations: "As with all disgusting ocean creatures, the sea cucumber is considered a delicacy in Asia." (You might think gustatory appeal would factor in to the grading,



but not so: the clam gets a C, and the garden snail barely passes.)

The book is at its worst when the facts are phony, and when metaphors are abused: "The locust is Nature's teenage girl." When food is scarce, desert locusts move closer together to compete for resources; then "the crowding triggers a metamorphosis and the locusts enter the feared 'gregarious phase.' This is characterized by a remarkable shift in appearance and attitude and a precipitous drop in grade-point average."

Do you remember Chuck Norris? Do you remember those Chuck Norris jokes that were popular a couple years ago? The king cobra is the Chuck Norris of *The Animal Review*: "One bite from King Cobra is enough to kill twenty-five people or drop an elephant. Sometimes King Cobra does this as a party trick." If you liked that joke you'll like this book.

Lentz and Nash wrote *The Animal Review* because biology is too nonjudgmental. Science, they claim in the foreword, "ignored the fundamental reality that some parts of Nature are more interesting than others." I disagree. Ask an entomologist why she's an entomologist, and she'll probably say insects, particularly the insects she studies, are the most interesting creatures.

They're not the first writers to turn a judgmental eye to nature. Ogden Nash wrote subjectively about many animals. My favorite poem turns on the stupidity of pigs.

Here is what Herman Melville, in a story called "The Encantadas," has to say about a creature regarded by many people today as adorable:

What outlandish beings are these? Erect as men, but hardly as symmetrical, they stand all round the rock like sculptured caryatides, supporting the next range of eaves above. Their bodies are grotesquely misshapen, their bills short, their feet seemingly legless; while the members at their sides are neither fin, wing, nor arm. And truly neither fish, flesh, nor fowl is the penguin; as an edible, pertaining neither to Carnival nor Lent; without exception the most ambiguous and least lovely creature yet discovered by man. Though dabbling in all three elements, and indeed possessing some rudimental claims to all, the penguin is at home in none. On land it stumps; afloat it sculls; in the air it flops. As if ashamed of her failure, Nature keeps this ungainly child hidden away at the ends of the earth.

One of the best things about the book is its design: it looks and feels like one of those educational animal books for children. The nostalgic pleasure for this former *Zoobooks*

aficionado ended there; those childhood books induced awe and wonder. *The Animal Review* induces frequent eye rolling and occasional interior laughter.

*The Animal Review* is not a book to be read in one sitting. It's better to just flip through it and look at the pictures, try to guess, from the table of contents, what the animals' grades will be, and then disagree with the grade, and wonder why the hell they didn't include otters.

There are some places a blog can't go. A print copy of *The Animal Review* is perfect for the person who doesn't have a computer, or a smart phone, Kindle, iPad, etc. It could also be useful during the part of a plane ride when they tell you to turn off all electronic devices. I usually spend that time shaking and sweating and holding in my screams as I imagine the cabin engulfed in flames, but some people prefer to read a book or magazine. Blogs don't last forever. They'll stop maintaining the *Animal Review* blog eventually; the book will be proof that it existed.

I hate the foreword, and some of the jokes are lamer than most of the animals indigenous to North America, but *The Animal Review* is funny. I'd like to be able to say, "Buy this book!," but why should you buy it when all of the content (and more) is available for free on the internet?

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\* I'm putting this collection together eleven years after this review was published and I just want to say while I stand by the review I don't stand by this sentence.

In conclusion, I'm happy that the skunk, the vulture, and the ladybug got high marks, but I'm pissed about the alpaca. Grade: C.

*The Animal Review: The Genius, Mediocrity, and Breathtaking Stupidity That Is Nature* by Jacob Lentz and Steve Nash

Bloomsbury

ISBN: 1608190250

144 Pages

Wish I Knew How to Write Poems

*Neutral Spaces*

February 28, 2018

I  
don't  
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understand  
poetry  
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Review of *A Life on Paper: Stories* by Georges-Olivier  
Châteaureynaud (translated by Edward Gauvin)

*Bookslut*

June 2010

Suspend your disbelief and imagine that taxi drivers know their cities inside and out. Now imagine a French cabbie named Moe. He's a born cabbie, the way Mickey Mantle was a born ballplayer. He knows his city—you can see where that's going. One day a man gets into his cab and gives a strange address: "Sweet Street, please. Number 42." Moe is intrigued. He has never heard of Sweet Street. The man leads him there, but he keeps him so engaged in conversation that Moe doesn't memorize the route. Sweet Street, it turns out, is not on any map, and no one in town has ever heard of it. It seems to exist in a parallel universe. If you're lucky enough to find yourself there, buy some apples. "No apple in his memory could equal them except the golden ones from the Garden of the Hesperides, in a little book of stories from Greco-Roman mythology." You can probably guess what happens next: he gets run over by a skateboarder in a pink tracksuit. He is revived. He drinks pear liqueur and plum spirits and dances with the skateboarder's older sister. He cheats on his wife, but he doesn't feel bad about it, nor should he. Everyone knows it's not cheating if you're in separate realities.

Moe finds his way home in the morning and gives a lame excuse to his wife, who seems or pretends to believe him. He searches for Sweet Street for years, but it's not an easy place to find. I'm not describing a new Ricky Gervais movie; this is a story by the French author Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud. "Sweet Street" is included in *A Life on Paper: Stories*, the first Châteaureynaud book to be translated into English.

Everything I know about Châteaureynaud comes from the back of the book and the letter from the publisher that accompanied it. I no longer have access to the letter because I wadded it up to play Paper Ball one night when my girlfriend and I were slightly drunk, and now it's gone. I'm a power hitter. I must have knocked it into Sweet Street.

I avoided searching for information about the author because I didn't want biography to color my reading. Some of the stories (this seems like a good time to mention they were all translated by Edward Gauvin) have appeared in publications like *The Café Irreal*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *AGNI Online*, but I hadn't read them. I didn't know what to expect. Ignorance is the perfect way to approach Châteaureynaud.

I can't describe the feelings of confusion and happiness and awe I experienced while reading these stories, so I'm just going to make a transition by quoting the back of the book: "In many ways, Châteaureynaud is France's own Kurt Vonnegut." This is the claim that attracted me to this book initially. I saw it in an ad in *Harper's* and thought,

I'd like to read that. Strictly based on physical appearance, that claim might be true, but Châteaureynaud reminds me more of Charlie Kaufman, who probably reminds French people of Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud. Some of the longer stories feel like the first act of a Kaufman movie. Châteaureynaud is also related to Kafka. "Écorcheville" calls to mind "In the Penal Colony." The killing apparatus in the Kafka story is often seen as predictive of Nazi horrors. "Écorcheville" might predict the horrors that await us in the age of unfettered capitalism. More on that later.

Unfortunately, I can't see there being a rage for Châteaureynaud the way there was and still is for Kafka, or the way there is for Roberto Bolaño. I prefer him to Bolaño, but the time for Americans going crazy over French authors, I'm afraid, has passed. Châteaureynaud seems aware of this: the unnamed narrator of "Another Story" says, "I am a writer—a French writer, to boot—two qualities worth less than nothing these days."

People complain about the crass commercialism of Christmas, but that's nothing compared to what happens in "The Excursion," where The Sirens' Isle (see Book XII of *The Odyssey*) has become a tourist attraction for the well-heeled. The world in which most of the stories are located has been heavily influenced by capitalists. There doesn't seem to be any countering influence. If you've got enough money, you can buy or do whatever you want. You can fish for sirens, as the exceedingly well-heeled do in "Another Story," or you can buy a



mummified young woman ("The Guardicci Masterpiece").

In "Écorcheville," which is the only really horrifying story in the collection, three automated firing squads are set up around the city for people who wish to end their misery. When Orne, a man unlucky in love and business, learns of these public suicide zones, he is not outraged or frightened (or tempted); "he was unimpressed." He thinks it's a gimmick. He "had trouble seeing how an entrepreneur might make back his investment, cover his costs, and show any profit." When he discusses the firing squads with his friends, there's no talk about morality or public danger. They're only concerned with practicalities: "'Even if you don't have a shotgun, a rope, or a sufficient quantity of sleeping pills on hand, you almost always have some cash or a credit card. And these machines take both forms of payment.'" (This is Orne's uninterested love interest speaking.) "'They fill a real need. With the basics settled, all that's left is adapting to demand: price, availability, selection.'" I forgot to mention that this is also the funniest story in the book.

*Écorcher* is a verb with a few meanings: to graze, to fleece, to skin. I can't think of a better word to describe what capitalism does. Écorcheville, or Fleece Town, is such a perfect capitalist society that there's even a minor character named Homini Lupus. *Homo homini lupus*: man is a wolf to man. Some of us are sheep.

The stories in *A Life on Paper* are connected—or at least some of them are—but they're not a collection of interconnected stories, like those in *Jesus' Son*, that band together like Planeteers (Captain Planet, we need you more than ever) to form a novel. Châteaureynaud has created a universe full of characters, places, and events, but he doesn't feel obligated to connect them. The action of one story has no bearing on the action of another story; characters and places simply exist, and they overlap on occasion.

*A Life on Paper* spans four decades of Châteaureynaud's writing career. The earliest story was written in 1973 and into 1974, and the most recent in 2002. But the stories themselves cover centuries. There are stories set in "present times," a story set during World War II, and one set in vaguely medieval times. Even present-day stories exist in pre-Christian times, as Greek mythology comes to life with sirens, the River Styx, and golden apples.

"Châteaureynaud is the author of eight novels and almost one hundred short stories," we learn from the back of the book. To borrow a "creative writing" cliché, I don't want to be told that information; I want to be shown. Some of Robert Walser's books have only been made available in English in the past few years. Someone give Edward Gauvin some money. I don't want to wait fifty years to read Châteaureynaud's other books.

The round of Paper Ball wasn't a drinking game; the drinking was coincidental. We had just

finished watching *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, and we needed something fun to do. We had not viewed the film to its completion; we were merely bored, and we were finished watching it. With respect to Mr. Gilliam, *A Life on Paper* is a far better tribute to the imagination.

Châteaureynaud's stories are disorienting, bizarre, mythical. The stories don't end with epiphanies or a tidy wrapping-up. Some of the endings are abrupt, even unsatisfying; they feel more like a beginning. So what? *A Life on Paper* is fantastic in both meanings: it's fantastic, as in strange, unreal, weird, imaginary; and it's fantastic, as in absolutely fucking awesome (in both meanings). People will call *A Life on Paper* magical realism. A few will call it irrealism. I don't care what you call it. I just want you to read it.

*A Life on Paper: Stories* by Georges-Olivier  
Châteaureynaud  
Small Beer Press  
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256 pages

Skammon Sense  
Neutral Spaces  
January 20, 2019

This might scandalize, but I still like ska music. A lot of people who are cooler than me have amusing opinions about ska music. But the cool people's derogatory opinions don't bother me; they're entitled to them. I don't care if they don't like the same music I like, and honestly I'm not a die-hard ska fan, or skaficionado. I never really went deeper into ska than Mustard Plug. I'm not saying it's the best type of music, or my favorite, just that it's better than the people who shit on it say, and those people are overlooking some important cultural impacts. Or something.

I first heard the term "alternative," as a descriptor of a musical genre, in a fucking Taco Bell commercial. They were giving away a promotional alternative music sampler in exchange for eating their tacos, I guess. My favorite song at the time was "Dreams" by a singer named Gabrielle. My favorite artist was still Garth Brooks, although someone had given me a Pearl Jam tape (*Vs.*, still my favorite Pearl Jam album), and I was about to get into that. This was before I ever heard of ska. I lived in Joplin, Missouri. I didn't have the internet or a cool older brother with a record collection. Our college radio station only played classical. I didn't

know that I could drive to Springfield or Fayetteville, Arkansas, to see bands play. I didn't know there was such a thing as indie or underground music. The only four genres I acknowledged were pop, country, classic rock, and rap. MC Hammer was my second-favorite artist.

High school was when I learned about ska. I was into Pink Floyd and Zeppelin, and those tastes marked me as a music connoisseur. Every song at our dances was by Bush or the Spice Girls. But one of my friends started a ska band, The Rowskabouts. I never went to one of their shows, but I bought their tape. They had songs called "I Love Cherry Cola" and "Proctoral." This is a line from "Proctoral": "Have you ever had a proctoral / right up the ass / I had to go get a proctoral / cuz my bowels they would not pass." Kind of dumb, but maybe that's the point. At a time when people were still trying to be ironic, ska was about being silly and having fun. You danced but you didn't give a shit how cool you looked. You thought up a stupid name for your band, bonus points for a ska-based pun. We had the Rowskabouts.

I think people regard the 90s ska bands as third-wave ska. I don't care that much. I didn't dress like a ska kid (baggy khakis, a white t-shirt, Chuck Taylors) or start my own ska band. But at a time when alternative music was mainstream, ska showed me there really was an alternative. There was such a thing as independent music. Ska got me into The Specials, which got me into Elvis Costello, which all got me into seeking out the type of music

I didn't hear on KSYN FM, which, given that all these years later I'm an agentless author, a writer in the alternative-alternative scene, seems important or formative or something.

## A song review of “She Left Me For Jesus”

by Hayes Carll

*Memoir Mixtapes*

June 20, 2018

I’m mostly okay, most of the time, with my lot in life, but I also wish I was Hayes Carll.

Carll is one of those musicians who is acclaimed and respected but not famous. He is so skilled as a songwriter that I’m comfortable talking about him in the same breath as John Prine and Townes Van Zandt. Every song he writes is better than almost every mainstream country tune that’s been recorded in my lifetime, but my favorite song is “She Left Me for Jesus,” from *Trouble in Mind*, an album that opens with a song Carll wrote with an acclaimed and respected but not necessarily famous legend, Ray Wylie Hubbard.

“She Left Me for Jesus,” which was co-written with Brian Keene, is the last and the countriest song on the album, featuring a steel guitar and Carll singing with a little extra twang in his voice. The song plays on the classic jilted lover theme, with a humorous twist equivocating on the word “find” in finding Jesus:

She left me for Jesus and that just ain't fair  
She says that he's perfect, how could I  
compare  
She says I should find him  
and I'll know peace at last  
If I ever find Jesus, I'm kickin' his ass

The narrator thinks his rival is some sandal-wearing hippie-freak-commie named Jesus, but the listener knows the narrator is actually jealous of his lover's Lord and Savior. At the moment, I can't think of any other songs, in any genre, that employ dramatic irony.

The funniest moment comes in the third verse, where the narrator declares,

I'm gonna get even, I can't handle the shame  
Why the last time we made love,  
she even called out his name.

It's a funny song, but it's not a novelty song. The musicianship is first-rate. Even some Paul Ryanesque ignorer of discomforting lyrics could still dance along.

For the record, I could imagine some hyper-sensitive Christians being offended, but the joke here is on the narrator, not anyone's religious beliefs, although I'm less certain about that claim after watching the video.



A Song Review of “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You  
Into Heaven Anymore” by John Prine

*Memoir Mixtapes*

December 7, 2018

I used to be patriotic, in that t-shirty, tearing-up-at-the-anthem, wanting-to-execute-flag-burners kind of way, but when I was seventeen I got into Rage Against the Machine and Kurt Vonnegut and eventually grew into a real person. Ain’t saying that’s the only model to follow, just that some people never develop beyond self-parody, and those people are the subject of a wonderful John Prine song called “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore.”

I don’t believe in having heroes, except for John Prine. I wish I could say I grew up worshipping him, but I came up in that New Country phase, Garth Brooks and his ilk. I actually did grow up a Prine fan; I just didn’t know it. One of my favorite songs was “You Never Called Me By My Name,” which was made famous by David Allan Coe, but written by Steve Goodman (who is credited in the song’s lyrics) and John Prine. That song exhibits the characteristics I love about John Prine, the playfulness, the wit, the self-awareness, all on display in “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore,” the seventh track off his first album, *John Prine*. It gets overshadowed by more

well-known songs like “Paradise” and “Angel from Montgomery,” but goddamn it is good. The opening lines, even with the misplaced modifier grammar nerds are about to spot, should be taught in writing classes:

While digesting *Reader's Digest*  
in the back of a dirty bookstore  
A plastic flag with gum on the back  
fell out on the floor

The narrator takes the flag with him and sticks it on his windshield, which by the end of the song is so full up with patriotic displays he can't see out of it. When he dies in a car crash, the narrator finds himself denied entrance to Heaven because

Your flag decal won't get you  
into Heaven anymore  
We're already overcrowded  
from your dirty little war  
Now Jesus don't like killing,  
no matter what the reasons for  
And your flag decal won't get you  
into Heaven anymore

Some folks, the folks who approve of blowing people up with our fancy killer skyrobots, would say the lyrics are self-righteous, but this song is the only anthem worth standing for.

ParaBull

*The Gallimaufry*

February 25, 2020

I don't know exactly how it started but for several years we all thought my aunt loved cows. She and my uncle own cows, so it made some sense. At the time my uncle made a living by jumping off a running horse and wrestling them to the ground. More specifically, he wrestled steers, which are bulls that don't have their testicles anymore. He was a professional bulldogger. If you're not a rodeo person you might be wondering why steer wrestling is also called bulldogging, but the term "bulldogging" comes, or so I was told, from way back in the day when cowboys would use bulldogs to run down steers for them. The bulldogs would bite them on the nose and hang on till the cowboys caught up and to this day the old-school bulldoggers will bite their steers on the nose when they're taking them down. (This is probably a thing they told me because I was a kid and sometimes it's fun to fuck with a kid's head like that. But grownups don't think about the consequences because look, here I am a grown-ass man and I still believe some cowboys bite steers' noses.) Doesn't make a lot of sense to me but I'm too lazy to look it up and I like this explanation the way it is.

The point, though, is somehow my aunt ended up with a cow-themed kitchen. It was all Holstein stuff, the quintessential black-and-white dairy cattle. The opposite of the types of cows my family had. They all had beef cattle. One thing they don't show in all the picturesque cattle art and propaganda is how many cows are covered in shit. They poop on each other sometimes. They get down on the ground and roll in it. That would make for a hell of a calendar.

So my aunt, at some point, acquired some sort of Holsteiny knickknack and from there it snowballed until her kitchen was a shrine to dairy cattle. People just kept buying little cow treasures for her. Coffee mugs. Delicate figurines. I remember I saw this udder cream at Wal-Mart and I made my mom buy it and we gave it to her. I thought she'd like it because the container was white with black spots, just like her favorite type of cow.

One day I asked my aunt why she liked cows so much. She goes, "I don't. People just keep buying me this shit cuz they think I like it."

## Serotonin: Some Tweets

*People say most books could be an essay and most essays could be a tweet so here is a book of essays within a book of essays.*

Hey girl are you a word doc cuz you're not responding.

As a stay-at-home dad I really love Zach Snyder's Justice League because if I need to get some work done I can just put it on the tv and by the time it's over my kids are heading off for college.

Blow up your tv deactivate your twitter move to the country build you a home

Pretty sure Jesus would hate America so so much.

Being alive does so much damage to the human psyche.

Weird to me how every Catholic I knew growing up was keenly aware that Catholics weren't looked on real fondly by a lot of our neighbors yet so many of them are still unable to extend that awareness to how the fuck do you think people who are way more at risk than Catholics feel.

Unironically there is nothing I love more than being stupid with my kids. The best feeling in the world.

There's a saying my grandpa taught me that I like to trot out whenever people don't like something I say on here and it's "It literally costs zero dollars to go fuck yourself."

Do you want to demolish capitalist? You NEED my ebook. It's normally \$49.99 but TODAY ONLY I'll give it to you free if you watch this 30-minute video. But wait, there's more! In addition to my revolutionary ebook you'll also get these woodworking plans for a custom guillotine.1/9

Exploring the woods with the kids (recommend) and I swung on a vine and the vine broke (don't recommend).

We all do incredibly stupid things that we'll regret for the rest of our lives. For example in 2010 a grad student at The City College of New York whose name I don't remember told me I'm not as funny as DeLillo.

It really is such a divine coincidence that by and large everyone who likes my writing is an all-around awesome person and everyone who doesn't is objectively a huge piece of shit.

"It was satire" is never a valid excuse because 1. most people are bad at satire 2. most people don't recognize satire and 3. satire isn't even real.

Note to scholars/critics: I would like it if someone described my work as part Edward Abbey, part Jerome K. Jerome.

This town is so weird, like one second the rock station is reminding you to download the app so you can get the babe of the day and the next there's a commercial saying it's by grace alone, not works, that you can get into heaven.

Just downloaded the app and the babe of the day is Grace so now it makes sense.

I intend to live forever and hate every minute of it.

Roll Call

*Neutral Spaces*

January 25, 2019

I heard a girl die. She was seventeen, talking on her cell phone, didn't hear the ambulance wailing as she turned out onto the street. It happened in reverse. I heard the sirens. Then I heard the crash and there were no more sirens. I wanted to write a letter to her parents, but I didn't know what to say. I do that, I don't say anything when people die because I know that everything people say when people die is bullshit.

I played fall baseball with a guy who, weeks after our season ended, was decapitated in a car crash. They were going over 100 on those tiny paved roads between Joplin and Kansas. Came up over a hill and . . .

The only friend I made in college, who was with me when I found out about my sister, was murdered. We were driving to Alaska, stopped over in Vancouver. We had got drunk the night before. We smoked Cuban cigars. I had to turn back. I was a wreck. He drove on. Couple years later I saw his face on the tv in the morning, then got a call from his ex. We had once driven from Boulder to Arkadelphia, Arkansas, so he could win her back.



My uncle's heart gave out when he was nineteen. He was working on the neighbor's farm, doing him a favor, turned a wrench too hard or something. I was five. I remember where I was when my mom called to tell me. How I felt. My dad thought she should have waited until he took me back to her house. Definitely ruined our weekend. It's been thirty years and I tried to tell my son about him recently because his great-grandma had died. I was showing him pictures of my uncle and my grandparents and I started crying. Fuck you.

My cousin had the same condition, Marfan. Pretty much everyone on my mom's side has it except my mom and me. I always felt guilty that I didn't have it. She was just walking across the room. Her last words were oh no.

My last grandparent died when I was twenty-eight.

One of my best friends from childhood overdosed on heroin shortly after I graduated college. Hadn't talked to him in years but I still drove to Missouri for his funeral. His mom was surprised to see me.

Another uncle choked on his own vomit.

A friend's dad was murdered in his own house. I used to go there for sleepovers. His mom made excellent pancakes. We always joked about his parents doing it in the jacuzzi but I can't remember how that started.

My wife's grandma died last year and she said that was the first really significant loss in her life. Her grandma was 101. It's not a competition.

I saw a car crushed by a slab of rock that fell off a mountain. Everything was fresh when this happened. I was still a wreck, I mean. We were on our way to California, leaving Boulder through the canyon. But there was no one in the car.

A second-cousin had a seizure while driving a four-wheeler and it flipped over and killed her and the kid who was riding on it with her.

I could do more but I guess I don't have to. Some of these people obviously meant more to me than others. There are more I've known and I still can't talk about my sister and this isn't a fucking therapy session. I feel like I've sort of got hold of my anger, but maybe I'm just waiting to unleash it on the right person.

We don't really know how to explain death to our children. I had stomachaches so bad when I was a kid that I would cry because it hurt so much and I didn't know what to do or what was wrong or how to make it stop. There was nothing wrong with me. I had all the tests. I'm not using anyone's names here, in some cases because it's easier for me not to use their names, in others because it's not my story to tell. It took me hours to fall asleep when I was a kid. I'd just lie in the dark obsessing over eternity. The thought of heaven terrified me. When I finally fell asleep I had nightmares about hell. The devil. Demon dogs. I don't want that for my kids. No priest ever touched me, aside from a few creepy

shoulder pats, but the church did fuck me up. I quit when I was nineteen. After all the child-fucking, I can't understand how anyone can still fuck with the catholic church. At my wife's grandmother's funeral I got angry as soon as I stepped in the building. I wanted to smash everything. When my uncle died—he was more like a big brother to me, he was my favorite person in the world and I was five—the priest didn't want to do his funeral. Said he didn't go to that church, a church my grandparents helped build, so they should go somewhere else. Said that to the parents of a nineteen-year-old kid who died because no one knew he had fucked-up connective tissue. Motherfucker. They both died within a few years of that, my grandmother, at the age of 60, from the Marfan, my grandpa, at 64, from cancer. George H.W. Bush can suck my dick. He should have died then and they should have lived. I remember, in '88, making them laugh with my Bush impression. I crossed my fingers and said read my lips, no new taxes, and they laughed. We were Dukakis people.

My dumbass fucking dad has diabetes. Is overweight. Doesn't exercise. My wife's dumbass fucking dad has had two heart attacks, etc. It will be hard for our kids. We'll go to their goddamn funerals and we'll tell our kids, listen, people are going to tell you things that aren't true, or that no one can know to be true, but just let them say it because it makes them feel better, and if you have questions ask us, etc. If anyone says the word angel to me, though, I will probably clock them. My son

was reading a book about ancient Egypt and he showed it to my wife last night. He read it to her. There's a bit where it says that the ancient Egyptians believed in an afterlife. He said to her, "That's my favorite line."

## Motion

There was this woman. That's all I need to say. "Do you remember that woman—" I'll say, and my wife knows who I mean. "The one on the beach," she'll say. "Nothing moved." Exactly.

I don't know what year it was, the black hole years for me, maybe 2007 or 2008. We had driven to Ensenada, Mexico, to visit some friends I made when I lived in England who became sort of a second family for me, and on our way back we drove up to Los Angeles, got a cheap hotel somewhere, couldn't tell you what neighborhood or anything. But it was the end of a long day, we went to the beach and drank Pacifico at sunset. And this woman was running, and we both just watched her because nothing on her body moved. Nothing bounced or jiggled. She was an attractive woman but I wasn't staring at her out of horniness, just complete awe.

That's what I want. I want to run on the beach. I want to linger in a stranger's memory as an ideal.

## Scars

### *Neutral Spaces*

March 15, 2021

My kids like to hear about my scars. I have one on my right leg, right under my knee. I think I was five years old when it happened. We lived south of town, out in the country, my mom had a double-wide trailer on seven acres. Nice little setup. There was a pond and a cool old barn where I played when I was brave enough to go inside. I spent a lot of time by myself. Single mom, no siblings. No neighbor kids. There was a junk air conditioning unit outside our back door, hadn't worked in forever and no one had thought to haul it away. I don't know why but there were a couple square bales of hay stacked on top of the derelict AC, about even with the back steps so to me those square bales on top of the old AC was like a back porch. Except the rain had worn away at the hay bales and made them unstable. One day my mom was out mowing the lawn and I stepped out onto the square bales and they gave way and I went straight down and sliced my leg open on this metal panel door of the AC thing. It cut me down to the bone. My mom heard me screaming and jumped off the mower, grabbed me up and took me inside and wrapped a towel around my leg. She threw some towels in the passenger seat of her black Buick Skylark and threw me on top of them and

drove a lot faster than was safe on the narrow windy road in to Joplin. She took me to the ER of the hospital where she worked and anyway all these years later I have a badass scar about four inches long right under my knee. There was so much blood.

A few years later a TV fell on my face. I'm very lucky it didn't kill me. I was at my dad's place, he lived in a trailer park in Parsons, Kansas. It was a nice little trailer. His TV was on top of this empty cabinet and I was swinging on the doors like a little dumbass and the TV fell. The commercials you hear on the radio where IKEA is telling you to secure your dressers to the wall, that's what they're talking about. The thing that saved me was the cord. Somehow it didn't come unplugged from the wall. My dad says he could see behind my eyeball. It's gross. So I have a scar above my left eye and a scar in between my eyes and a scar right above my face that my hair hides. I don't know if my kids even know about that one.

I feel like I've written all this down before but I think it's just that I've told these stories to my kids so often. I'm writing them down for them. Maybe they'll see this one day, when they're older. Maybe they won't even remember how much they loved hearing about my scars and this will remind them. You guys will never know how much I love you.

It's not technically a scar but I broke my finger in the eighth grade playing basketball and it never healed, so I have a crooked pinkie on my left hand.

It's not just scars, they like to hear about all the ways I've gotten hurt. How I had to get stitches after I got hit in the mouth with a baseball during warmups before the all-star game this one time. Instead of playing in the game I had to go to the hospital. Probably should have just shoved a bunch of cotton in my mouth but there was a lot of blood. I got those dissolving stitches.

There was the time the basketball goal fell on me. An old wooden one on an oak tree at the farm. I was dunking on it, knowing it was unstable, hoping I would bring it down and feel powerful or something. Like a dumbass. It came down, the wood frame of the homemade goal hit me right on the mouth but fortunately also hit right on my shoulder and that took most of the blow. My mom didn't think I needed stitches. We went out for Mexican food that night and I couldn't eat so I just got a virgin strawberry daiquiri.

The summer before I went to college my step-brother ran over me with a golf cart. I passed out and dreamed I was yelling at my step-brother for running me over with a golf cart. Then I came to and I was like what the fuck you actually ran over me with a golf cart.

Writing this essay has made me sad. My boys love these stories about how I've hurt myself physically but I don't talk to them much about the other kinds of hurt, like maybe I should, maybe that's what I'm supposed to do so they can be better men than me, but I don't know how to talk about that shit. What I want for my kids is for them



not to have all the hidden scars that I do but the last year has really shown me that no matter what I do they're just going to. Fuck.

We Live in Hell: A Review of *Only Americans Burn in Hell* by Jarett Kobek

Atticus Review

March 23, 2020

*The version of this review that is published on the website is slightly shorter, different, and less offensive to certain rich literary citizens than the version that follows.*

I'm writing this review in the wake of a literary dustup over a book I've never read and, with any luck, won't ever read. There are a lot of reasons to hate *American Dirt*. The cultural appropriation. The boring prose\*. The bad attempts at Spanish. The possible plagiarism or hardcore imitation. The barbwire-themed book party. The thing I hate most is that the author got a seven-figure advance for writing it and almost everything I write I write for free and almost everything my friends and peers write they write for free. I'm writing this review for free. Not even for exposure, since I don't have any

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\* To be fair, I've only read two paragraphs that I saw screenshotted on Twitter, and those could have been the two most terrible paragraphs in the whole book, while the remaining paragraphs could all be vivid and electrifying and other words people use to describe the type of prose that I usually find boring.

illusions about how many people are likely to read it, but just for fun, just because I want to.

My country's immigration policies are racist and evil, have been since forever but our president has found a way to make them worse. I'm angry about it and feel powerless to do anything; I suspect the author of *American Dirt* felt the same way, so she wrote a book about it and a big publishing company gave her at least a million dollars for it. My point is we live in Hell.

I'm on the record as someone who opposes blurbs, but I also chose to read *Only Americans Burn in Hell* because Alan Moore blurbed it. And, as an American, I related to the title. I wasn't familiar with the author, Jarett Kobek, although once I started reading I figured out, from the many references he drops, that he wrote a novel called *I Hate the Internet*, which I had heard of. He was also shortlisted for a Bad Sex in Fiction Award, which I respect. You should know, if you're the type of person who enjoys making fun of the Bad Sex in Fiction Award nominees ever year, that the Bad Sex in Fiction Award was started by Auberon Waugh. So cool it. If I was writing this review with blurbable sentences in mind I'd be sure to say "*Only Americans Burn in Hell* is the perfect book to read when you live in Hell, which is, in fact, where we live," and I'd be right.

Your MFA instructor would hate this book. There are no stakes, in the traditional, writing-teachery sense. The characters aren't relatable and they don't change or grow. The plot is looser than

the pretext Trump used for assassinating an Iranian general at an Iraqi airport. (Ugh, I might need to cut this allusion because who even remembers that, it happened so long ago.) I guess you could say *Only Americans Burn in Hell* is a reckoning with the ascendance of Trump, but instead of fixating on Russia or the mythical “white working class,” Kobek, who also serves as one of the main characters in this novel, turns to Jean Baudrillard, who “theorized that there would be a moment when reality collapsed into fiction, at which point it would then be impossible to distinguish the fake from the actual. He called this the Hyperreal.” Like the Second Coming, nobody knew when the Hyperreal would take over. Enter Trump, like a mean-spirited parody of Jesus. Instead of saving our souls he melted our brains.

The book alternates chapters with Kobek narrating his own life and adventures, from writing an unexpected best-seller to being nominated for a Bad Sex in Fiction Award to attending a transformative Guns N’ Roses concert, and stepping back to tell the stories of some Fairies from Fairyland who travel, for reasons that don’t really matter to me, onto the mortal plane, a couple supranatural beings whose main purpose is to serve as a foil to rich people since “it was an open secret that the acquisition of vast wealth was the quickest way for a human to become a supranatural being.” And once a rich person acquires enough wealth, they pass the Cash Horizon. “Beyond the Cash Horizon, the weath-

accumulating individual was transformed into a supranatural being. In other words, *the rich were not human.*" Explains a lot.

I don't have enough space to quote all the bits I want to quote, to say all the things I want to say. Sort of a metaphor for mortality. Anyway Kobek has a lot of the same complaints and grievances as me, especially when it comes to wealth and publishing. *American Dirt*, published by Flatiron Books, selected by the same bigshot editor who brought us *The Help* way back when, is a handy illustration for what Kobek means when he says "Despite decades of effort, and thousands of Internet thinkpieces about the inclusion of marginalized voices, publishing was a dirty business that had done nothing to alleviate a system of ghettoizing its authors based on their physical appearances and socio-economic points of origins."

Yeah, this book is everything your MFA instructor hates. It's self-referential, disjointed, and funny. Worst of all it's critical of the publishing industry. I laughed out loud and wrote "Ha!" in the margin when I got to the bit where Kobek is roped into participating in Literary Death Match, which he describes as "the clusterfuck of debasement that has overtaken writing." I laughed because he's right and because one of the creators of Literary Death Match is Elizabeth Koch, the supranatural daughter of the supranatural billionaire Charles Koch. If you don't know who Charles Koch is, think of it this way: He's basically

Satan, but without the redeeming qualities. His daughter co-founded a literary spectacle that pits writers against each other, which is basically a metaphor for publishing within capitalism, only probably not as entertaining, and she cofounded *Catapult*, an “independent” publisher launched with blood money from her terrible father, which publishes books and stories but mainly exists to get you to sign up for a bunch of online classes. Basically, if you’re a writer and you want to get paid, you have to—ah fuck, it’s like I said, we live in Hell. Congratulations to Jarett Kobek on getting paid to write a book about it.

Snake Stories  
*The Gallimaufry*  
April 2, 2020

Someone, I think it was once of my uncles, once told me they had caught a black snake and thrown it in the washing machine and it was so strong it kept pushing the lid open no matter how hard they tried to keep it shut. Pretty sure it was when my mom and I were moving in to a new house in Joplin, and my uncles were there helping. We had a lot of trouble getting the washer into the little laundry closet off the kitchen. One of us tore the new linoleum wrestling the machine into its nook. I wish I remember which one it was who told me this story because I'd like to ask why, why the fuck did you do this? But we all know I'll never ask. "Hey, remember that story you told me like twenty-four years ago?" "No."

One time I went outside at my grandpa's house and there was this massive black snake just climbing a tree. My grandpa came out and chopped it to bits.

I was at this outdoor concert outside of Joplin, don't remember what the event was called but it was by Shoal Creek. There was this girl I'd gone on two dates with in high school and I'd been awkward, hardly talked, she was there with her boyfriend, so maybe that's why I hated him, but

also for some reason we all drifted away from the main concert area and were down by the creek and someone had found a black snake and he kept saying "Kill it, kill it, let's kill it." They all thought it was a water moccasin. I was pissed. I said "Leave it alone." They did but not because anyone listens to me, just because no one had the courage to kill it.

I always stand away from the mailbox when I open it because when I was a kid my mom, who is batshit terrified of snakes, told me that sometimes people will put snakes in your mailbox as a prank. We lived out in the country and our mailbox was right there on the highway and anyone could just drive up and plop a snake in there real easy. It was totally plausible to me and apparently it still is.

I was mowing someone's lawn in Longmont, Colorado, and I spooked two bullsnakes that were just hanging out in the grass. Motherfuckers slithered right between my feet. Jesus.

I was driving down from the mountains in my old pickup. It was a 1984 Chevy C-100 I'd inherited from my great-uncle Max. Red. I loved driving it. It had no power, the clutch stuck sometimes and there were rust holes in the floor but it was a beautiful truck. I was a stay-at-home dad and just needed a break so my wife said I could go backpacking by myself. I hiked way up off the trail and found a great spot on a ridge and once I had my hammock rigged up I decided I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be with my family. It was breaking my heart not to be with them so I packed everything up and hiked back to my truck and



drove down from the mountains and on the way back I ran over a big snake. It was dusk and I didn't see it in time to slow down. If I'd been a better dad I wouldn't have needed to be up in the mountains on my own and that snake would have lived; if I'd been a worse dad, maybe not worse but just different, I would have just stayed up there and that snake would have lived. I don't have my truck anymore but I can still feel the bump of that snake. Sorry, snake.

A lot of times you hear a snake before you see it. We were out at Rocky Mountain Arsenal with the kids and I heard the snakes before they bolted out in front of my feet and out of sight into the tall grass. Scared the shit out of me all the same. A few minutes later we saw an oriole in a tree.

There was this issue of *Boy's Life* that told the story of this boy who was out hiking in the desert. He stepped down off a log, right onto a rattlesnake, and it bit him and he was miles out into the wilderness and had to get himself to safety. I don't remember the details much but the story always stuck with me. Between that and growing up in the snake-filled country I'm very careful around logs and when picking up rocks. Somehow even though I've spent a lot of time in the desert and try to be aware of little rustlings and movements that could signify a snake in my vicinity I've never seen a rattlesnake in the wild. Almost all the snakes I've seen were non-venomous. Sort of feels like a metaphor.

I read a story a few years ago about a guy back home who was bit by two water moccasins. I think it was in Shoal Creek somewhere but I don't know if I'm right and there's no way I'm looking it up. Anyway this dude got bit on his legs by two water moccasins and he didn't even go to the hospital. He died that night or the next day. Everyone on Facebook was calling him an idiot. I didn't call him an idiot because I take deaths pretty hard except when it's like George H.W. Bush or something. The story just made me sad and thinking about it now it makes sense that he didn't go to the hospital. How the fuck was he supposed to pay for it?

I don't really like snakes, but I don't hate them. I see them sometimes even when they're not there. Like I'll walk into a room and think I see a snake gliding away. Briefly, like in a barely perceptible way. I don't know if this is common, like an instinctual, self-preservation thing, or a glitch in the matrix, or a sign that I'm insane. Could be all those things. Obviously I don't announce it every time, "Shit I just thought I saw snake but it was actually just nothing, not even a shadow," because I don't want to sound insane. What if we all see phantom snakes and no one talks about it?

## Experimental Literature

### *Neutral Spaces*

April 16, 2020

The microwave light is out. We have one of those microwaves that goes over the stove. Installed it myself. Every morning when I go to boil water I turn on the microwave light and then remember that it's out. I need to get a new bulb but I don't want to die.

We need a light for the microwave. We need acidic toilet bowl cleaner. We need a couple storage bins because we want to move but we don't know when we can move.

I'm home with the kids. I'm home-schooling them. I'm working remotely. I'm tired all the time. I can't sleep. I have it easy.

Someone on twitter the other day posed the question of who's gonna write the worst pandemic novel. I didn't reply because I didn't know the person and she seemed, I don't know, not my type or something, but I'd happily write the worst pandemic novel if someone wants to give me a book deal. I would make that sacrifice.

Did a science experiment with the kids the other day. We bought my neighbor's truck a couple weeks ago. He was laid off because of the pandemic and I've been wanting a truck. We want to move to the country. It's an 88 Silverado with a flatbed and the kids love to jump around on it and

since the bed has no sides I'm always paranoid they're going to trip and fall. The thing sits so high off the ground a fall would really fuck someone up. I had them grab a bunch of different objects: a couple wiffleballs, some rocks, some leaves, some bits of grass. Then I had them drop them off the truck and see how long it took for them to hit the ground. Had them drop objects of different size and mass and see what happens. It's hard to keep them on track because they're kids but they did pretty good. Sometimes I want to say I'm not qualified, I haven't been trained to teach children, but I wasn't trained to teach grown-ass people either and that's what I do for a job. I'm a college teacher. At least for now. I'm scheduled to teach three courses in the fall and if we're still here I know there's no way I'll get those three courses. I'll be lucky if only one of them gets canceled. Who the fuck would sign up for college courses right now?

My kids love to ride around in the truck. Don't tell the cops. After we had dropped everything we gathered some more objects and just set them on the truck bed. A skateboard. Some rocks. A basketball. A pipe. We got in the truck and I drove up and down the street and they looked out the window to see how long it took for stuff to fall off. The skateboard rolled off before I even backed out of the driveway. There's a bit of a slope. The basketball hung on for a minute until I gave it the gas. It was a good experiment. I told my wife about it and she was impressed.

I've told her I think we should home-school the kids until there's a vaccine. Which means I need to come up with more experiments. I need to do more than I do now. We pass the time making movies, reading, watching TV. The kids do their remote schooling online and I try to work. At some point I'm going to have to figure out how to teach them math. This shit is hard but we've got it handled so far. All the stress and anxiety of raising children in the midst of a catastrophic climate crisis turned out to be good training for raising children during a global pandemic.

We drove that truck all around the neighborhood and I gunned it a few times but the rocks and the pipe hardly budged. The kids loved it.

Review of *A Brief History of Nakedness* by Philip Carr-Gomm

*Bookslut*

September 2010

In 2003 a group of British women shaved their pubes and sent them to Tony Blair with the message, "I got rid of my Bush—now you get rid of yours." This kind of protest (laudable, clever, comfortable) appeals to me. However, I'm thankful Dick Cheney was only Acting President of the United States for a few hours. Now that Bush is gone and, politically speaking, Americans are shaved, it does feel freer, cooler. Unfortunately, this feels like a temporary phase, as if we all shaved our bushes out of necessity rather than principle, as if Lady Liberty had pubic lice, but now she's letting it all grow back. It's awfully itchy. Did you know we're fighting a war in Afghanistan? I'm not terribly keen on it. I may be anti-military, but I support the troops, although my definition of support is more radical than the meaning attached to the bumper stickers; support, in my interpretation, is a preference for soldiers not to be placed in positions in which they're likely to be blown up or shot, and for them not to be sent home limbless or head-traumatized or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or denied benefits because they suffer from supposedly pre-existing

psychological conditions that didn't exist before they signed up. Some American troops are leaving Iraq. To draw attention to the forces that aren't being pulled out of Afghanistan, I wanted to call for a Great American Pull-Out. It's exactly what you think it is. There are a lot of logistical problems with that one, but wouldn't it be a blast? Then I was going to designate October 7, which will be the ninth anniversary of Operation Enduring Freedom, as International Go Commando for the Troops Day, but it turns out there's a Facebook group with a very similar name, although their commando week is in March. So now I've decided that we just need a naked march on the Pentagon. The protesters need to be naked to symbolize the vulnerability of the soldiers and the people of Afghanistan, and they need to march on the Pentagon because it's full of the pricks who run the war. All of these ideas and more were inspired by reading Philip Carr-Gomm's new book *A Brief History of Nakedness*, which, even if it doesn't make you want to get naked for peace, will make you want to get naked.

I like Philip Carr-Gomm. I like his style. He takes a risk in the very first sentence: "Here's a suggestion: stop reading and start taking off your clothes." Most writers would be wary of asking their readers to stop reading. I didn't take the author up on either part of his suggestion. I wanted to take off my clothes, but it was daytime, and the apartment has a lot of windows. (His point is that if you take off your clothes in the bathtub you'll get

naked, and if you take them off while browsing through his book in a bookstore you'll get arrested.) Carr-Gomm is knowledgeable but not arrogant, thorough but not boring, and *A Brief History of Nakedness*, with its fascinating photos and anecdotes, is a pleasure to read. I appreciate the author's understated writing style. Consider this sentence from a passage on naturists: "At Sandy Balls in Hampshire, adult members of the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, a youth movement created in 1916 as an alternative to the Scouts, sometimes met together in the nude...." A less confident author, aiming for cuteness, would have written something like: "At the aptly named Sandy Balls in Hampshire, adult members of the even-more-aptly named Order of Woodcraft Chivalry," and so on. There are other instances in which the author chose not to beat his readers over the head with a stick, but I forgot to mark them.

Even if you hate to read, you should get this book for the pictures. Carr-Gomm collected a wide variety of photographs, and if you browse through the book you'll see an advertisement from an old nudist magazine, Marilyn Manson's tuck-back juxtaposed with Nick Oliveri's (of Queens of the Stone Age) more open stance, and a picture of Peter Sellers with a guitar for a fig leaf. There's a naked women's soccer team and some naked men's soccer fans. There are naked shoppers, naked men in Mickey Mouse masks, and several streakers. There's a naked perfume model and a woman wearing a one-piece string bikini that just looks



uncomfortable. Make of this what you will: none of the penises depicted are erect.

There are six chapters, but the book is structured around three themes: nudity and religion, nudity and politics, and shifting public opinions toward nudity. Carr-Gomm roots proscriptions against nudity in religion, but he also notes the importance of nudity within mainstream religions, particularly Christianity. Jesus was naked on the cross (and depicted as such by the likes of Michelangelo and El Greco), St. Francis walked nude in the snow, and Pope John Paul II wrote in *Theology of the Body* that the body alone can make “visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God.” As Carr-Gomm points out, the body is a paradox, both beautiful and—regrettably—shameful. “On the one hand the body is a creation of deity—in Christian terms made ‘in the image of God.’ On the other hand it is both the locus of our suffering and its cause.... The fact that the body can be cast as both temple and prison has resulted in the ambivalent attitude to it that is found in many religious approaches.”

In the middle two chapters he discusses nakedness in the political realm. My favorite chapter covers nudity as a protest tool. Carr-Gomm starts with the legend of Lady Godiva and moves on to show how nudity has been used by environmentalists and other activists—like Breasts

Not Bombs—to draw attention to their causes and protest injustice.

The final chapters cover the loosening of strictures against nudity, from streakers to musicals to advertisements. The section on streaking is a highlight. My favorite Ray Stevens song has always been “The Streak,” and my favorite photograph in the book is of a muscular, tattooed naked guy being held in the air by an angry-looking footballer. Some people would be offended by *A Brief History of Nakedness*, but there’s no doubt we’re more tolerant toward nudity these days. Even in my lifetime I’ve loosened up. When I saw Kevin Bacon’s cock in *Wild Things* I was shocked. Ten years later, when I saw Jason Segel’s in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, I laughed. Now I think there should be more cocks in cinema for the very simple reason that they’re funny.

Is nakedness a human right? Carr-Gomm doesn’t state that human beings should have the right to go naked; he assumes it. I’ll say this much: there should be more nakedness. There should be more clothing-optional beaches and facilities, women should have the right to breast feed in public, universities should look the other way on mass student nudity, and streakers should not face stiff penalties. But as Carr-Gomm points out, “Being naked is often an act not only of celebration, but of defiance: of the individual claiming their right simply to be, in the face of potential obliteration or of tyranny.” Nudity is a powerful protest tool. If nudity becomes totally acceptable it

will be stripped of its power. We still need that power. I'll protest for the right "to express oneself freely and without inhibition . . . as the birthright of every individual" when there's nothing left to protest.

Almost all the causes—peasants' rights, animal rights, women's rights—for which people get naked are liberal causes. Why should liberals have all the fun? Here are a few ideas to get conservatives started. They could have a Shirt Off My Back party where they walk around topless to protest letting part of the Bush tax cuts expire. You won't find a ton of conservative men willing to go The Full Monty because a lot of them don't have any balls, which is a shame because the N.R.A. could have a really fine naked rally under the slogan Gloc Out With Your Cock Out! They could hold placards that read, "You can have my handgun when you pry it out of my tight little ass." Of course, conservative people tend to be pro-stricture and pro-Establishment, while naked protest is generally an anti-Establishment activity. If I ever get my naked march on Washington, there will probably be some clothed counter-protesters with signs that read, "Keep your clothes on for the status quo!"

*A Brief History of Nakedness* by Philip Carr-Gomm  
Reaktion Books

ISBN: 1861896476

286 pages

American As Fuck

MalarkeyBooks.com

February 13, 2018

When I was twenty-three I wrote a short story with a pretentious title that no one can compel me to reveal. The story was told from multiple points of view: a teacher who gets fired unjustly, a young girl whose father is sexually abusive, that young girl's mother, her grandmother, probably some other characters, too—I just can't remember. One of the characters, I remember, sees a black dildo in the parking lot of a mall, a little detail I stole from real life. I saw a black dildo in the parking lot of a mall and it was like I was possessed; if I didn't put that displaced dildo in a story the Earth would explode. Like everything, the dildo had no real significance, other than I probably thought it would be edgy to have a grandma see a black dildo in a parking lot. All the voices in my unpublished, mostly forgotten story formed a disjointed narrative about how the town where I grew up is a shitty place to live. I've learned, over the years, that there are shittier places to live, like Colliersville, Indiana, the fictional but real enough town at the center of *Tornado Weather*, the first novel by Deborah E. Kennedy.

I hadn't thought about that story in years, but it came to mind a few times as I was reading *Tornado*

*Weather*, which is better executed than that old story while using the same basic structure. Just as you get used to the voice of Fikus, the bus driver who drops off a wheelchair-bound student whose disappearance ties the whole disjointed narrative together, he disappears and you're getting the story (told in the present tense now) from the perspective of an investigative reporter who's about to publish a story that's going to take down an exploitative dairy owner and disrupt the lives of his workers. After that there's Renee Seaver, who comes from a family with a bad reputation, whose father doesn't help that reputation with his involvement in a half-ass militia. After that it's Shannon Washburn, who is dating Josh Seaver and works at the Laundromat. And so on and so forth, etc. The thing all the characters have in common, aside from where they live, is that they're all thinking about Daisy Gonzalez, the little girl who has disappeared. Who took her? Where is she? Is she still alive? It's so sad. Pray for her. The effect is not as disorienting as in Francine Prose's *Mister Monkey*, which I never got around to finishing. It's a very MFA type of thing; you challenge yourself to write about an event from the perspectives of the people around that event, both in the center of it and on the periphery, and you decide sometimes you'll write in the first person, sometimes you'll write in the third person but heavy on the free indirect discourse, and you'll switch tenses the way Donald Trump switches wives, and just because you can you'll throw in a chapter written in the second

person and even—SPOILER ALERT—a chapter from a dead person who has been reincarnated as a —shit, I don't have to give it all away.

The book echoes, with some distortion, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which I haven't read in at least sixteen years. Any decent American who read the books back to back would immediately apply for citizenship in any country that's willing to take Americans, if such countries still exist. To read *Tornado Weather* is to see where we are right now. I guess if you think Colliersville seems like a nice place full of reasonable, decent people, you won't be much bothered by where we are. Go to hell.

There was much to prejudice me against reading this book, but I read it anyway. I'm glad I did. I haven't read his more recent books, and he might go on to do wonderful things that I won't know about, but I'll never forgive Benjamin Percy for writing *The Wilding*—or maybe I'll never forgive Graywolf Press for publishing it. Seeing his name attached to the blurb at the top of the front cover could have put me off reading *Tornado Weather*. "Dark and dangerous," says Benjamin Percy, bestselling blurbist of *Red Moon*, "and strange and wonderful . . . Kennedy writes with the gritty poetry of Daniel Wodrell and misfit sensibility of Flannery O'Connor." I hesitated as I spotted the blurb while reaching for the book. There's something incestuous about that blurb, along with some of the back blurbs, considering that

most of the authors quoted in praise of *Tornado Weather* were Kennedy's writing instructors at the University of Iowa (one of the downsides of including an acknowledgments page is readers can see the relationship between blurb-writers and the authors they're blurbing for), but what sets *Tornado Weather* apart from a book like *The Wilding* is its relevance: *Tornado Weather* is America.

The book is set fairly early in the Obama era, and one assumes much of the book was written while Obama was president, but *Tornado Weather* is probably, to date, the best book about the Trump presidency. It's about Trump people, people who are decent-hearted—in some cases people who only think that they are decent-hearted—but bad at causal reasoning. "They talked about what was ruining this country." "They," in this quote, being the worst people in the book, the people responsible for Daisy's death; on this subject, though, they think the same things as everyone else. This is a theme of the book, the ruination of America, and while the people of Colliersville can all identify the effect, that Colliersville is a shitty place to live and Colliersville is America, none of them is able to pin down a real cause. They're always chasing red herrings, like immigrants, trans people, and Obama. Here's Helman, a prominent citizen of Colliersville, reflecting, toward the end of the book, on where everything went wrong:

Once I had two sons. Now I have none. One son died. The war. He didn't know I existed. The other thinks he's a girl so I guess in a way you could say I have a daughter but she won't talk to me—considers me the devil incarnate—so there you go.

Once I had a whole farm, a booming business. That can be taken away, too. Even here in America, land of the dream and the free and the brave, what you work so hard to build from the ground up can be snatched away and given to someone else. Just like that. All my cows. The machines. Years and years of labor. My father's land, in my family since William Henry Harrison was governor of the Indiana Territory, gone. Frannie said she heard the farm was going to be cleared for a shopping center, a tacky strip mall with a Wal-Mart and a Shoe Carnival and a Subway. A once noble plot turned into a playground for the poor. I don't know where Frannie gets her information, but I guess that's what's called "spreading the wealth." Robbing from the rich and giving to the undeserving. Hey, Robbing Hood. Hey, Barack Hussein Obama, why don't you go back where you came from?

That's Helman, a Real American, a greedy fuckup who ruined his business all by himself, with



a little help from some shady dealers who don't seem to have any ties to the Obama administration, reflecting on the wrongs done to him as he flees Colliersville, on his way to join some militia group living in a fortified compound with their own 3-D printer for manufacturing guns. His wife, Birdy, sees more clearly. Helman has sent her for a stay in a mental hospital: "He could blame the overzealous cops and the over-reaching government all he liked, but neither the cops nor the government forced him to transform their respectable and reputable family business into something illegal and shameful." But Birdy can afford to be rational: she's got someone to blame. Helman's got to hang his shame and resentment on someone. No better target than the government. Don't hold it against him. Blaming your own mistakes on other people and then getting mad enough to go live with a group of well-armed angry paranoiacs is American as fuck.

*Tornado Weather* might be the only book (aside from the novelization of *Rudy*) I've read that is set in Indiana. It is possibly the only book I've ever read that wasn't written by Kurt Vonnegut that even mentions Indiana. You could expect this book to be embraced by the so-called forgotten people, except they probably wouldn't like the way they're portrayed. Kennedy writes about highly flawed, often unlikable characters without condescension, but she also doesn't convert their bellies to Batman pecs the way Trump's artistic fanboys do when they draw him. It's a warts-and-all book. There are

racism warts and paranoid warts and depression warts and general dumbass warts. It's not the type of hagiography that the people who are mad about not being the subjects of enough *New York Times* profiles even though they're now the subjects of ninety-seven percent of *New York Times* profiles have been asking for. It's just real. And it's probably ruined *Parks and Rec* for me.

Ultimately, *Tornado Weather* is a book about fuckups. That's us. If you're an American, you're a fuckup. It's your inheritance. We are all descendants of misfits and fuckups, fanatics, criminals, outcasts, people who for whatever reason didn't belong. What other word describes a country that fights a war in the name of freedom but doesn't free its slaves? Nothing but fuckup will serve. Richest country on the planet and we can't provide free preschool or healthcare? Fuckups. We don't think Hillary Clinton is trustworthy enough to be president so we elect a pathological liar instead? Bunch of fuckups. We are Americans. This is our country. This is our book. Just to be clear, who's ruining everything? We are!

Interstate  
*Neutral Spaces*  
January 31, 2019

He turned when he wasn't supposed to. I didn't say anything. I knew I was never going home. It wasn't the first time I was afraid. My earliest memory is of not wanting to go to my dad's for the weekend. Not sure how old I was. Maybe three. We still lived in town then, still had this dog, Smokey, who was a giant, who we got rid of because he jumped all over me. I can see his outline through the frosted window on the door and I can feel his anger. He didn't hurt me. He wasn't mean to me. I was just scared to go with him because I didn't know him. He wasn't my mother. He wasn't around. Of course, he was around. He was pretty good. Came on time every other weekend. Usually bought me a GI Joe at Wal-Mart. Thinking about it now, a father myself, I understand why he was angry. He drove an hour after work to pick me up and his ex-wife was telling him his son didn't want to go with him. It was his fucking weekend. I stole this memory, this scene, worked it into a story that maybe six people have read.

We spent a lot of time in the car together. The drive from my mom's trailer to his trailer was over an hour. We drove to Oklahoma some weekends to see my grandma. She made the best biscuits and

gravy. She would cook rice for breakfast and you were supposed to mix in heaps of butter, milk, and sugar, and everyone I tell about it thinks I'm stupid but it's delicious. Except it never tastes as good now. She believed herself to be half-Cherokee. "I want you to find yourself a nice Indian girl," she would say to me. But my dad took one of those dna tests and he came back zero percent native. Turns out we don't know who the fuck we are. On those drives we listened to the Eagles and Steve Miller. "Abracadabra" is a terrible song, yet it's hard for me to hate it the way it deserves to be hated. It's all twisted into my memory in that special Proustian way.

My mom's trailer was on seven acres twenty minutes south of Joplin. I can't imagine why she ever decided to move there, other than cosmic balance. Her parents lived on a farm twenty minutes north of Joplin. She worked late so it made no sense to drive all that way every day. We didn't work the land. We had cows for a while. We had a horse named Apple until he rolled on top of me, but that was later. We had a cool old barn and one time my friend Jason and I accidentally set a scorpion free there. I had a board that I hammered nails into which has something to do with Jesus but I'm not sure I know how to explain it. He should have kept going straight. Main Street goes out of Joplin and turns into 86 and then veers into C highway which is where our "farm" was. But he got on the interstate instead.

I tensed up. I didn't know where the interstate went, but I knew it went far. I knew there was no way to stop him. I'd seen this after-school special. My mom let me watch too much tv. The dad in this show abducts his son. Keeps him living in a motel for years while his mother searches but never finds him. I don't remember all of the plot, but somehow the motel room gets set on fire and eventually the kid is reunited with his mom. Why the fuck did she let me watch that? Why the fuck did she live out by herself in the country, as afraid of snakes as she was? She ran over a snake mowing the lawn once and by the noise she made I thought she'd mowed her foot off. I get kind of pissed off if I'm in the passenger seat and the driver goes off course, and I guess I just figured out the reason why. Pretty sure I started crying, but I don't really remember. When I write this for real I'll wrap it up as fiction and I can fill in those details. All my childhood memories are bad or sad. Even the nice ones, fishing with my grandpa, eating rice for breakfast, are polluted by the shittier ones. I want my kids' memories to be nice, but I also wonder if people who have nice childhoods are the people who grow up to be privileged assholes? I don't know. Turns out I wasn't abducted, though. He just needed gas and there was a whole mess of truck stops a mile down the interstate. He could have gassed up on his way home. It would have made more sense, but he just wanted a little extra time with me.

God and War From Above: The Alan Cut  
A Review of *A Theory of the Drone* by Grégoire Chamayou (translated by Janet Lloyd)  
*Atticus Review*  
August 25, 2015

*Note: this is the original, uncut version of this review.*

Every American should read *A Theory of the Drone* by French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou (translated by Janet Lloyd). Don't be put off by the French philosopher; while it's not light reading, it's remarkably simple and straightforward. Still, most Americans won't read it. So here's a summary of Chamayou's theory: the drone is a cowardly weapon that expands the scope and territory of war (war is now like God, everywhere, all-seeing, eternal) and makes that war so one-sided that it should really be called terrorism; violates state sovereignty and international law; and makes the people the drones are supposed to protect less safe.

Obama's critics stretch their imaginations to the limit to attack him. Yet when it comes to the area in which he is most vulnerable to legitimate criticism, very few people call him out, presumably because they share his fondness for what Chamayou calls "the weapon of cowards." His full statement is qualified: "Judged by the yardstick of [bravery and sacrifice], a drone *looks like* the weapon of cowards." Drones require no courage, although they require a sense of sacrifice. Drone operators

don't risk their bodies, but "they do risk their mental health. This would be a specific form of bravery, defined" not by physical risk "but by exposure of one's psychic vulnerability to the effects created by one's own destructiveness." It must be a horrible job for anyone burdened with conscience. How do you press a button and make someone on a different continent die and not see yourself as a monster? At least in combat it's kill or be killed. With drones it's more like kill and hope you don't blow up any children. Drones seem good because they make *our* soldiers safer, but that safety could come at a high price. Chamayou says "We are thus faced . . . with two hypotheses regarding the psychic life of drone operators: either this weaponry creates insensitive killers," operators who view their jobs as like playing video games, "or else it produces a mental process that involves being tormented by guilt, potentially to the degree of inducing neurosis. In practice, the truth about any given individual probably falls somewhere between those two poles. As for which of the two options is the more desirable, that is a question that remains open."

In the era of drones, self-preservation is the ultimate virtue. For the American soldier, this can mean sacrificing your warrior identity. Chamayou writes that some in the Air Force resisted "the general adoption of the drones," partly because drones threatened "their own virility, which was largely associated with the taking of risks."

I don't believe drone strikes, even when they harm only their targets, make Americans safer. But they are good marketing for terrorist recruiters. Obama's opponents are correct when they say his foreign policy has made us less safe—they're just right for the wrong reasons. Chamayou relates a story from a Pakistani Taliban leader who "'spent three months trying to recruit and only got 10-15 persons. One US attack and I got 150 volunteers.'"

In addition to helping terrorists with recruiting, we might also be choosing their targets: "If the military withdraws from the battlefield, enemy violence will turn against targets that are easier to reach," like American civilians.

And in addition to providing terrorists with targets, we might also be providing their weapons. Chamayou describes Iraqi insurgents hacking a Predator drone's video feed, but that is not the only instance of drones being hacked. Plans for hacking them are on the internet. Imagine an American drone under terrorist control attacking American civilians on American soil. People in ISIS are imagining it.

It's easy to love drones: they're new and fancy and cost-effective (and profitable). And they make us safer—except they don't. Drones are like torture, both unethical and impractical. Drones and torture are the two most perverse examples of our obsession with instant gratification. They serve us in the short run, and they're instantly satisfying, but in the long run they'll both do more harm for us than good. Chamayou cites a *New York Times* op-



ed by David Kilcullen and Andrew McDonald Exum; they “called for a moratorium on drone strikes in Pakistan” because “those operations were dangerously counterproductive for American interests. People were congratulating themselves on short-term tactical success without seeing that they would pay dearly for them at a strategic level.”

The U.S. is a nation of laws, but it’s also a nation that doesn’t mind bending, rewriting, or radically reinterpreting laws to suit its purposes. Obama’s lawyers probably learned a lot from John Yoo. What he did for torture they’re doing for immanent warfare. According to Chamayou, “if the special laws of war [like the right to kill] apply only in the place where the fighting takes place, then beyond that place one has no right to behave as a warrior.” Since we’re not engaged in armed conflict in Pakistan, our drone strikes there “constitute grave violations of the laws of war.” We don’t care if there’s an “actual armed conflict” in Pakistan: “According to the military and the CIA, it is because we can aim at our targets with precision that we can strike them down wherever we choose, even outside any war zone.” We’re also, in Chamayou’s view, engaging in terrorism: “In making combat impossible and transforming armed combat into execution, the aim is to annihilate the very willpower of those opposing them . . . . It is fighting by means of terror, and no attempt is made to disguise the fact.” All the power is on one side.

When it comes to fighting terrorism, there are two competing strategies: counterinsurgency is about winning hearts and minds, and antiterrorism is about blowing heads off. Chamayou says that “Dronized manhunting represents the triumph . . . of antiterrorism over counterinsurgency. According to this logic, the total body count and a list of hunting trophies take the place of a strategic evaluation of the political effects of armed violence.” Antiterrorism is cheaper and easier, but “once antiterrorism overtakes counterinsurgency . . . the sufficient aim becomes a regular elimination of emerging threats.” However, “The very dynamics of its perverse effects prevent it from ever fully decapitating a hydra that regenerates itself ceaselessly as a result of the strategy’s own negativity.” If you scraped off your “Endless War” bumper sticker after George W. Bush returned to Texas, it’s time to invest in another one because “The scenario that looms before us is one of infinite violence . . . .” Chamayou doesn’t mention genocide, but it’s the logical conclusion. In order for antiterrorism to be effective, we have to be willing to commit genocide: the more alleged terrorists we kill, the more we’ll have to kill as new hydra heads pop up to replace the decapitated ones. In order to live with ourselves, we’ll need a softer word than genocide, maybe pre-radicalization elimination.

Drones may be precise, but they’re not substitutes for intelligence. When they’re used that way, innocent people can die, as was the case when

“an American strike decimated a group of men meeting in Datta Khel, Pakistan, on the grounds that ‘they acted in a manner with AQ [al-Qaeda]-linked militants.’” They weren’t militants, but “Seen from the sky, a village meeting looks just like a gathering of militants.”

Liberals have been too easy on Obama. If a Republican president had pursued his drone policy, we would have been marching and railing and sitting in. (Sitting in is not a good strategy against drones; you might be mistaken for a gathering of villagers.) Obama took Bush’s drone policy to a new level. Democrat or Republican, Obama’s successor will do the same—unless we demand a new policy.

If there’s a weakness in Chamayou’s theory, it is that it’s entirely negative. I’m sure there are soldiers whose asses were saved by a timely drone strike who weren’t concerned about cowardice and courage, just grateful. Chamayou doesn’t call for the abolishment of drones; he also doesn’t address the question of whether drone strikes are ever acceptable in just war. Drones have uses. They can help filmmakers, scientists, and conservationists; maybe they have a limited place within warfare. We need a different drone theory: drones should only be used for good and genuinely humanitarian purposes, not to expand the territory of wars, carry out assassinations, or keep people under constant surveillance, and they won’t be used by American military or police to carry out surveillance or law enforcement in the United States.

Americans are more complex than we seem to some outsiders. We're very particular about how we perceive ourselves. We may be powerful and rich, but we see ourselves as the underdog. We are the Yankees, but we pretend to be the Royals. We need to understand how other people see us: citing Kilcullen and Exum, Chamayou reminds us that "the widely shared perception is that of a hateful power that is both cowardly and contemptuous. Beware of a backlash."

Yes Day  
Vanity Press  
May 3, 2021

There's a scene in the film *Yes Day* (2021, directed by Miguel Arteta) where the movie mom played by Jennifer Garner is on stage at a music festival. She has talked her way up there the way moms will do because she has to find her daughter Katie (Jenna Ortega). Katie has snuck (it's snuck, okay, literally no one says sneaked) away to the festival without permission, an opportunity created when Allison (Garner's character) is arrested at a carnival after getting in a fight over a stuffed gorilla she is desperate to win to give to Katie, with the hope of winning her back after a big dramatic blowup. At this point, Katie has realized she actually isn't old enough to go to the concert by herself, that the boys her mother had warned her about, you know maybe they could be trouble after all. Nothing happens but there's a subtext. She ends up having a bad trip (without the drugs). Can't find her phone. Freaking out. All she wants is to be safe with her mom, whom she doesn't even realize is up on the stage saying she wants to find someone but doesn't want to embarrass them, so if they hear her voice . . . Katie doesn't hear her voice, though, not until Allison grabs a ukulele and plays a touching rendition of the Four Tops classic "Baby, I Need Your Loving." I say "touching" because I'm a

wreck and it had me on the verge of tears. Katie finally hears her and runs out into the aisle yelling Mom Mom Mom, and Jennifer Garner sees her and climbs off the stage and hands off the ukulele to a security guard like he's a running back who didn't know a running play was called. They run into each other's arms. It's saccharine. It's beautiful. I'm crying. My wife, I looked over and her eyes were red. She was crying. The way she does in these touching scenes in family movies. Our oldest boy I don't think was crying, although he might have been, but Oscar, our five-year-old, got ahead of his feelings. We were all sitting on the couch together, in our little rental house. Oscar turned around on the couch and said, "No. Not gonna watch this part. Too sad" and stuck his butt up in the air and put his blanket over his head. Fucking brilliant.

After the movie we talked about maybe what if we did a Yes Day as a family? With some ground rules. Like you can't ask to go anywhere more than twenty miles away and you can't ask for anything that exceeds the budget for the day and you can't ask us to assassinate your enemies or do anything illegal or unreasonably dangerous. But for that one day if you ask for something, and it's within the rules, we would have to say yes. We don't like to say no all the time and we try really hard not to be authoritarian parents, which is fucking hard, and in the last year we've admittedly said yes to some things we would have passed on before. Should we buy them this expensive Lego set for Christmas? Should we just buy *Croods 2: A New Age* since it's

not on Netflix or Hulu? Fuck it, why not, it's a hellworld let's do it. It's just a refrain that will immediately cause the other one of us to acquiesce. Virg thought we should order an inexpensive laptop for George to use for school and I was like, I don't know if he really needs that, and she said "It's a hellworld" and I said "Yeah you're right. Sure. I guess." So a Yes Day, my wife and I have never even talked about it before, it just feels cool, like something that we need. The problem is the movie kind of freaked the kids out. Like they think if we have a Yes Day crazy shit is going to happen, all kinds of out-of-control hijinks that will lead to their mom and me getting arrested. Naturally they don't like cops or trust cops, they know enough about the world to know they shouldn't trust the fucking cops, so I can only imagine what they think their mom and me getting arrested would actually look like. (The other day I was out in the street with the kids. They were riding scooters. A cop car came down the street. Oscar said we have to hide but George said no, just don't let him see your face.)

Everything is so fucking stressful. We're all wrecks.

On Valentine's Day this year George had a seizure. It lasted about six minutes. Virg and I had just got them to bed and picked a movie to watch. *War* with Jet Li and Jason Statham. From what I saw of it the film is a waste of the two best actors. I'll never know, I'll die before I ever try to watch that movie again. Not long after the kids fell asleep and we sat down with some wine to watch

this shitty terrible movie we heard a weird noise coming from the kids' room. Sort of thought it was the dog, he's a talker, makes a lot of weird noises, but it didn't feel like that. We paused the movie and both went in, my wife flipped on the light and we saw him. I don't need to describe it. She ran to him and I ran for my phone and called 911. I started off very calm. I just said our address. I said "My son is having a seizure and you need to send an ambulance." The 911 lady asked me to repeat the address. My wife reached up and pulled our son from the top bunk and set him on the floor. That super adrenaline mom strength. The 911 lady was asking questions, standard stuff, I was pacing from the room to the front door, looking for the fucking ambulance. I was losing my mind. I went from calm to freaking out, I was yelling on the phone saying "THEY NEED TO GET HERE NOW!" I knew he was having a seizure. I've seen people have seizures. Logically I knew he was going to be okay but I also thought he was dying and I cannot ever live without him. I kept flipping between conversations, yelling "We love you, George. We're going to take care of you. THEY NEED TO GET HERE NOW! You're gonna be okay buddy. Help is on the way, we love you, we love you so much THEY NEED TO GET HERE NOW!" They finally got here. I was on the phone for six minutes. By that time the seizure had ended but he was out of it. He didn't become responsive at all until they had finally got him in the ambulance. We were all in the kids' room, my wife, our boys, four



EMTs and a fireman. Charlie on a leash. I asked if one of us could ride in the ambulance. They weren't sure because of covid. I said one of us has to ride with you because we only have one car that works right now. We'll walk down to the hospital if we have to though. It was snowing. It was when everything was so cold, the start of the subzero cold spell you saw on the news. The funny thing is Oscar slept through it all. An EMT was about to sort of half-sit on the bottom bunk bed until he realized there was a kid there. I used to be able to sleep like that. I lost the ability when George was born and now I'll sure as shit never get it back.

I don't know, he's fine. He's healthy. He's normal. Tests were good. The neurologist in Kansas City said he's healthy, it might never happen again. We might never know what caused it although we think it was stress and we still think it was our fault even though the neurologist said you have to know this isn't your fault. I don't know, I sort of think it's everyone's fault, and everything's fault. After this year of covid who hasn't had a stress seizure, really. It's all we think about it. We know he might not ever have another one but every night when he goes to sleep we wonder. We don't say it but we wonder.

He shouldn't have to deal with this. This shouldn't have happened to him. It could have been worse. Many kids have to deal with far worse. I'm not going to say we're back to normal but he's fine. My wife and I we're trying to be more mindful about things, like we're under so much stress and

we know he picks up on it so fuck, but what do we even do? I quit drinking, not because I had a problem but because I know I drank a lot more throughout covid, like on paper I had become a binge drinker, and it was going to take a toll on my health and the way I can't ever lose my kids I know they can't lose me. And I never want to be in a state where it's not safe for me to drive. We're about to move to the country. I have to be safe to drive at all times. And I'm going to get a fucking snowplow to attach to my truck.

After *Yes Day* was over and the kids were ready for bed I told a story as usual. The past few days I've been telling stories about Frank the Mutant Deer, which the kids are turning into comic books, and they've been after me to add new characters so there can be a superhero crew. They've been asking for a mutant snake so I figured I'd add a mutant snake.

"Out in the middle of a field," I said. "No mom or dad. No brothers or sisters."

I was just trying to give the snake an origin story but I know how it sounds. George started crying. I got up to comfort him. Told him it was okay. He said he just needed a minute to be with his feelings. He said he felt better. He said your story is just really sad. I said I know but it's not going to be sad in the end. He said "Just please don't make me the person in your story who doesn't have a family." Kids say things that will break your heart.

I told them the origin story of Melissa the Mutant Snake. How she was an orphan who was scared to be with the other animals in the forest, so she went into the field where none of the other animals went because it was so polluted with toxic goo. How she woke up feeling weird, how she realized she had gotten smarter, and grown a pair of human legs, and was twelve times her normal size. And could fly. And how the army chased her through the sky and she took refuge in a cave and so Frank the Mutant Deer, who can fly, who has super speed and super smell and who can shoot lasers from his eyes and whose antlers are harder than the hardest metal, goes down to Arkansas to find her. He hollers from outside the cave "Hello-oh-oh-oh-oh. Are you a giant snake-ake-ake-ake?" And a voice says "No, not me, I'm just a normal person lady and not a giant snake with human legs." Frank says "Okay but it's kind of weird that you said that that way-ay-ay-ay-ay," and she disagrees, she says it's weird that he thinks it's weird and it's weird that he keeps repeating the last syllable of the last word he says. And he's like "Well now it's even weirder, are you sure you're not a snake?" And she says "I'm s-s-s-s-s-sure" and Frank says "Aha! So you ARE a giant snake." George thought that was hilarious. He was totally invested in the story now. Frank tells Melissa he's not there to hurt her. He just wants her to join his superhero crew. She wants to know why she should and he says "Well, we have a frozen yogurt machine in our office" and she says "I'm in."

George thought that was hilarious as well. So on the way to California, where Frank has a secret office above the video game store where he works, he calls and orders a frozen yogurt machine so it will be in the office when they get there. Eventually the superhero crew will include a puppy and a monkey and a wolf. Wolves are so cool. Eventually the Mutant Deer universe will cross over with the Bionic Turkey universe. It's gonna be epic.

What I'm thinking about now is is it better to just be with your feelings for a few minutes or to stick your butt in the air, hide underneath a blanket, and tunnel your head into the couch cushions. Catharsis vs. self-control I guess. I've tried both and I know it's not healthy to always hide under a blanket with your butt in the air but isn't it okay sometimes to just not want to be with your feelings? I don't know the answer. I don't know shit. Neither do you. Oscar at this point is all in on a yes day. He's going to ask for Lego set after Lego set and we're going to have to remind him that there's a fucking budget dude. George is still uncertain but he'll come around.

Time for Baseball: On Reading *A Season in the Sun* by  
Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith

**MalarkeyBooks.com**

May 21, 2018

I loved Mickey Mantle because my grandpa loved him—or because, after my grandpa died, I heard stories about how much he'd loved Mantle. I grew up in Joplin, Missouri, not that far from Mickey's hometown of Commerce, Oklahoma. Mickey also played minor league ball in Joplin. He's one of our only legends. Mickey Mantle. Langston Hughes. George Washington Carver. There were always rumors that Mickey played golf at Loma Linda, a private club for rich people. Something I never understood: if you were rich, why the fuck would you live in Joplin? I would play sometimes at Loma Linda South, which was public, harboring a stupid fantasy that I would somehow see my idol, like maybe he would take a wrong turn and end up at the pleb course. I was an idiot.

I wore the number 7 for a long time, but I had a better season, my senior year of high school, after I switched to 8, which had no history or baggage behind it. I learned from reading Mantle's autobiography, *The Education of a Baseball Player*, that I should switch to center field. Like Mantle, I was too wild to play shortstop. In center I could roam and curse and fucking launch it. Moving to

center also helped me have a better season; I was freer, less in my head.

Mickey Mantle was a good idol to have because he was flawed, and when I learned about the flaws I wasn't disillusioned. I accepted that my heroes didn't have to be perfect. I still loved him. In *A Season in the Sun: The Rise of Mickey Mantle*, Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, whom I have to admit I'm now extremely jealous of, strip away the bullshit, the phoniness, the manufactured image of Mantle, and leave you with the man. He was flawed. He drank too much. He ran around on his wife. He was a hell of a ballplayer.

Something many people live their whole lives without learning is you can love someone, or something, in spite of flaws, weaknesses, and mistakes. I'd suggest that you don't really love Mantle if you don't know that he cursed out an old woman from the dugout. You can't love an illusion: "The sports journalists who knew him best largely hid that he wasn't remotely like his public persona and was instead an often moody, angry, hard-drinking, philandering, flawed man. They sold Mickey like political columnists sold America during the Cold War." The fact that his image was phony doesn't take away from his accomplishments or greatness. You don't have to buy Mickey as a hero, as a dutiful husband or moral paragon, to appreciate him, just as you don't have to whitewash our history to love or appreciate this country.

I can picture the hardcore dumbasses calling the authors a couple of social justice warriors for suggesting that part of the reason America fell in love with Mantle was because he was white, a great white player at a time when some white people feared white athletes were getting overtaken by black athletes. The truth of American racism or white grievance doesn't take anything away from Mickey Mantle. There's no indication he saw himself as some great white hope. He just wanted to play ball, and even through all the injuries, pressure, criticism, and fuckups, he played baseball like no one else.

I picked this book up at the library, wasn't sure I would get around to reading it, but goddamn I'm glad I read it. Summer's coming. The Rockies, as of this writing, are half a game out of first place. My son, who throws right and bats left and looks like a natural hitter, is about to play t-ball. I'm harboring this delusion that if he keeps batting lefty I'm going to teach him Mantle's drag bunt. I know I'm being delusional, ignoring numerous other factors, but it seems like this country really started going to shit with a purpose when football became the most popular sport. It's time for baseball.

*A Season in the Sun: The Rise of Mickey Mantle*

Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith

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Inauthentic

*Neutral Spaces*

February 20, 2019

I never said y'all until I started teaching. Maybe I experimented with it for two weeks after I got home from Mickey Owen Baseball School, the summer before eighth grade. I bunked with these guys from Arkansas who had fingered girls. I didn't even know what fingering was. They had to explain it to me. They had seen girls naked and I hadn't. They had Southern accents and I didn't. Looking back now, I realize people from other parts of the South would probably sneer at their cute little Arkansas accents, but to me it was Southern. I didn't have an accent. I didn't know what my accent was supposed to be, so I tried it on. I had been through my cowboy phase, Justins and Wranglers and a black Stetson, but it never felt authentic, even though my uncles were cowboys, even though we lived on a farm. I pretended to like riding horses.

By the time I went to baseball camp I was over the cowboy look, over country music. I'd found two Beatles records that my mom had and listened to those on repeat until expanding my musical taste with the Forrest Gump soundtrack. I said y'all. I spoke with a drawl. No one really noticed and eventually I forgot to keep doing it. People around



me kept their drawls. Some of them. I never really knew if I lived in the South or the Midwest. People had conflicting opinions. A few hours east, a few hours north, maybe that was Midwest, but we were twenty miles north of Arkansas. Missouri was a Confederate state, although I rarely saw Confederate flags. Those didn't get popular until Obama. So don't be fooled, a lot of these Southern pride types are poseurs, too.

I guess it was freeing. Living in a cultural vacuum like Joplin, Missouri, meant you could be who you wanted to be. Which means a lot of people chose to be racist motherfuckers.

I lived in England for almost two years, and I'm proud to say that even though I was full of shit and very immature I had enough sense not to affect an English accent, even when people in the states would say to me I don't know how you can live in England and not pick up that accent, if I lived in England I'd probably pick up an accent.

I say y'all now. I say it in class; nobody knows I never said it when I lived in Missouri or Arkansas. I say it on twitter. It doesn't feel authentic but I do it anyway because it's more efficient than you all. Also because I'm waiting for some Rebel-flag-humping poseur to accuse me of cultural appropriation. I feel like there was no point to any of this, but that's always the point, right? Everything is pointless but you make your own meaning. Or something. I don't know, y'all. I just don't know.

## The Bottom of the Mountain

### *Neutral Spaces*

May 14, 2019

A long time ago, at a music festival at the base of Mt. Werner, this guy asked me if I wanted to smoke weed with him. I was there by myself. I didn't have any friends. I said sure. We sat down on the grass in an out-of-the-way spot. I'd smoked maybe once. I was excited. This was the type of scene I envisioned when I moved to Colorado, smoking weed with a random hippy on a fucking mountain. It was a two-day festival. Blues Traveler and Ben Harper were the main acts. A jam band called The String Cheese Incident was playing both days. I don't remember which day it was, the day of the weed-guy incident, or which band was playing, not because I got so baked I erased the moment from my memory, just because this was probably the summer of 2001. I kept to myself, mostly. Had hated living in the dorms so much that I paid the penalty fee to move out early, moved into an apartment near the mountain with a weirdo named Bob. I'm a year older now than he was when I was his roommate. He's got to be dead now, right? Just from the way he coughed. I don't know what he'd done to his lungs, but sometimes he sounded like my grandpa, who had emphysema, who'd been on oxygen at the end of

his life. The lives some people live, I'm not trying to side with this grandpa, he wasn't that great, but he killed himself working, breathing in gasoline fumes day after day, built a little house in the country. The only real joy I think he ever experienced was eating homegrown tomatoes. With salt and pepper. But he's gone and the house is gone. His step-kids sold it a couple years ago and it's been bulldozed and where his massive vegetable garden once stood there's either soybeans or cows. I don't fucking know, I don't go out there anymore. Not even saying it was wrong to tear that house down; it's bizarre to imagine my dad living there, going to bed each night in a bare basement room that looked like a torture chamber, concrete floors, concrete walls, hardly any light—that basement was terrifying and I'm glad it's gone. I went off to college in Leavenworth, Kansas, on a baseball scholarship, but I hated it. Hated living in a prison town, hated being on a baseball team at a no-name college. So I fucked off to Steamboat to be a ski bum. Except I was a snowboarder. I rode by myself. I didn't talk to people on the lifts. I didn't know how to talk to girls. I didn't know how to talk to anyone. I wanted to be able to and I thought this hippy could be my ticket, my first chance at human connection in a town where I had no friends or family or roots. We'd smoke weed, I'd open up, we'd talk, we'd hang out, we'd stay connected even after the festival. I was sitting there, hope building up in my soul, waiting for him to pull out a little baggie and some paper. We're

sitting there in the grass at the bottom of the mountain and he says to me, "So you got any weed?" But I didn't.

Parenting Award  
*Neutral Spaces*  
September 11, 2019

Sometimes the things you don't say are as important as the things you do say. My kids are crying every morning. They don't want to go to school. It's a contagion. By the time I get the oldest one on his way, crying, he says, because he misses me when he's at school, the little one is upset because he doesn't want to go to school because, he says, he misses me when he's at school.

"I hate my school," the little one said last week in the parking lot. "Why?" I said. "Your brother loved this school. He always tells me he wishes he could still go here." "I hate my school," he said. He is a debate tactician.

I tried another tack: "My preschool was terrible. It wasn't even a preschool, it was just daycare. At daycare you don't even learn anything. You just sit there. They made us eat nasty peas at lunch, but you get to bring whatever you want for your lunch. The worst thing was that you couldn't get up from the table to go play until you ate all your peas. It was terrible." I was about to say, "Also the director of the daycare hurt the children," but I stopped myself just in time. What a thing that would have been to say to a three-year-old who is anxious about going to preschool and being left alone with

kind but still strange adults. I know they've been background-checked. He doesn't know they've been background-checked.

Monday is an early let-out at the elementary school so I was able to pick the seven-year-old up first, which I like because it gives us time to talk. He told me his friend had just been crying and he asked what was wrong and his friend told him another student had given him a note that said "I'll kill you." "It wasn't just him," my son told me. "She meant all of us." I called the principal right away. He said he'd get the kids together first thing in the morning. "Motherfucker," I didn't say, "you'll call that girl's parents right now and fucking go to her house and make sure she's okay and doesn't have access to a fucking gun." I took him in late the next morning; we knew it was one of those things that kids say. Lord knows I would have been "talked to" for some of the shit I said and wrote in school if I was ten years younger. I graduated high school the year of Columbine. We also know that children are killing each other, and we weren't going to send him in until we had a good long conversation with the principal. "I'm taking you in late," I said to my oldest son, who was fine with going in late but would have preferred not going in at all, "just because we want to make sure everything is okay. That your classroom is safe. We want to make sure xxxxxx is okay. She probably didn't mean what she wrote . . . ." I didn't say, "But at the same time children sometimes bring guns and knives to school to kill

their classmates and their teachers. This is the fucked-up world we've brought you into." What a thing that would have been to say.

I used to be obsessed with death. "Used to be" is a stupid way to put it. "I've been obsessed with death since the age of five, only now I'm sort of able to cope, more or less" is a better way to put it. I was five when my uncle died. He was nineteen. I've written about it before. More deaths followed and it felt like everyone around me was dying. I had these vicious stomachaches all the time. I had these terrifying nosebleeds almost every day. I developed asthma, by which I mean I started having panic attacks that would wake me up in the middle of the night, unable to catch my breath. I remember being at the farm, waking up in the middle of the night, wheezing, wondering if I would die. My mom took me into the kitchen. My grandma boiled water and wrapped a towel over my head and told me to breathe in the steam. Pretty soon after that she died too and my mom and I moved to Texas. I was afraid to go to sleep every night. We were Catholic. I believed in Hell and Satan. I was eight or nine and the thing that scared me most was Heaven. What do you do with all that time? I read books about vampires and zombies and demons but I knew that stuff was fake. I believed in Satan. I believed in God and Jesus and it all scared the shit out of me because it was true. My mom was a nurse and she told me about this patient she'd had who'd nearly died. He'd been dead, in fact. He told her when he was

dead he saw the devil and the devil was a giant, snarling black dog with sharp teeth and fiery breath. Just massive. So that's what I dreamed about. What a thing that was to say.



## Conversation in a Chairlift

### *Neutral Spaces*

September 17, 2019

I used to live in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, a ski town known for its immaculate powder. I moved there about eight months after dropping out of St. Mary College—now University—in Leavenworth, Kansas, which I attended for one semester on a partial baseball scholarship. I drifted out to Lafayette, Colorado, where I worked at Subway until I got a better-paying job at the Wal-Mart across the street. Working at Wal-Mart sucked but I learned a good way to steal shoes, which is you go to the shoe department and try on some shoes, then you put your nasty old shoes in the shoebox and put the box back on the rack and walk out with the new pair on your feet. I moved to Steamboat to restart my life. I moved there to be a ski bum. I was actually a snowboarder.

I rode most weekdays in the winter, in between classes at Colorado Mountain College. Always by myself. This one time I was heading toward the lift line. I stopped for a second to unstrap my back foot and I saw a skier come flying in, he cut in front of a guy, also a skier, who was just about to get in the line. I ended up stuck on the lift with the guy who'd been cut in front of and he was pissed.

He goes, "Did you see that? Did you fucken see that?"

And I said, "Uh huh."

"Shit," he said. "He'd've got his ass kicked if this was the East Coast."

"Oh."

"You don't pull that shit on the East Coast."

"Okay."

"I would've beat his ass if this'd been the East Coast."

I never liked talking on the chairlift. Just let me look at the snow. But this day I made an exception: "Yeah, I guess it's different out here," I said. "Out here we'd just be chill and say no worries, then get on the lift with him, wait till we get up high, and throw him off the chairlift."

And that East Coast dude he smiled and snickered and he goes

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## Disclaimer

That was just a joke. I didn't really push a coast snob off a chairlift. This book started at like 80,000 words and now it's down to 32,000. I deleted a lot of shit. I was almost going to delete the chairlift bit because there's always a possibility someone will take it seriously, but I don't know, for some reason I like it. You could get after me for including a joke essay in a collection of selected nonfiction. It's misleading. It's confusing. Fiction is fake and nonfiction is not fake, as our grade school teachers like to say even though they're wrong. I didn't really push that annoying guy off a chairlift. To be honest I most likely did not ride up on the chairlift with him. I remember the incident, there was a guy like that, but I was just in line with him. I don't know what happened. Maybe someone else pushed him off the chairlift. God knows I would have.

Obit

*Neutral Spaces*

January 14, 2019

Billy liked to take me to the malt shop. We'd get corn dogs, tater tots, cokes, malts. God. He had to ask several times, so maybe it was my dad wanting to trust him, maybe it was him just being worn down, but sometimes he said yes. Of course if it was me I wouldn't let my kids go; maybe we are over-protective, but my wife and I know the type of shit that happens to children. Still it surprises me my dad let him take me alone. My dad was over-protective in his own way, for his time. Stonewall is a tiny town, most likely everyone knew who he was. Knew who to call or which door to knock if something happened. And the malt shop was right up the street. Best corn dogs I ever tasted.

He's dead now. We just found out last month. That would be December of 2019 except it turns out he died back in September. That means I have three dead uncles. The place that was caring for him, they had my aunt's number in Stonewall but she changed her number over the summer. Somehow they didn't have anyone else's contact info so he's buried near St. Louis instead of in Kansas, next to his dad, which is fine in a way since he was a lifelong Cardinals fan. He'd go to Oklahoma or Pittsburg and stick around for a while but always

drift back to St. Louis so he could listen to Cardinals games on some shitty portable radio. One time I found a pair of cheap red sunglasses at Wal-Mart that had St. Louis Cardinals, with the bird logo, etched on the shades, and I got my mom to buy them and gave them to him whenever the next time was I saw him.

Billy wasn't easy to be around. He was annoying. Feels like I shouldn't say that but it's the truth. He repeated himself. Fixated on stuff. Fidgeted. I remember one time we were at my grandma's old place, before it burned down, and he had this roll of cough drops, and he'd suck one cough drop until it was gone and then pop another one in his mouth. He was just eating cough drops like candy and it drove my dad nuts. I don't know what his diagnosis was, or if medication could have helped. My dad, much as he loved his older brother or felt obligated to look after him, couldn't really stand to be in the same room with him for any great length of time, which is maybe why he let him take me to the malt shop. For me it wasn't a thing. He was different. I didn't know why. He didn't scare me or anything. He bought me corn dogs.

He disappeared for a long time and my dad found him in St. Louis. Living on the streets.

He got beat up one time in Pittsburg, possibly for muttering the n-word on repeat under his breath. I was in high school then and I had got it into my head to teach him how to read. I couldn't believe he'd never learned to read and I'd drive an

hour up to Pittsburg once a week after school and work with him. He lived in this terrible apartment above a pet store. Straight out of *Barfly*. When I first saw *Barfly*, four or five years later, I immediately thought of Billy's apartment. We'd go over the alphabet. I didn't know what I was doing. We'd always end by going to Western Sizzlin' and he'd tear into the buffet. I'd pay. I had busboy money but it's worth remembering gas in Joplin was like ninety-seven cents a gallon back then on an expensive day. Then basketball season started and I didn't have time to go up there. And one day I heard he got beat up and one day I heard he was back in St. Louis so I guess I was off the hook.

I don't know if I remember the last time I saw him. It wasn't at Bobby's funeral and it wasn't at my grandma's funeral and it wasn't at my sister's funeral but if it was I don't know if I'd remember anyway, I was kind of a wreck. It might have been on a trip I took to Stonewall. It might have been my senior year of high school or during my brief stint as a college dropout after my first semester, I don't remember and as you can probably guess I've never been great at keeping records. I spent several days there. My dad was there part of the time but he had to go back to Kansas to work and I hung around, something I'd never done before. Spent a lot of time with Billy. Talked to him. Drove him around. Spent enough time with him that he started to get on my nerves and I even snapped at him one time and thought *jesus*, I sound like my dad.

Billy never met my wife. Never met my kids. I haven't even told them their uncle, their great-uncle, is dead. Feels shitty to articulate this but I realize now they probably don't even know he ever existed.

There's a frequently quoted line of Dorothy Parker's, whenever the phone would ring she would think "What fresh hell is this?" It's the one thing about phones that's stayed consistent over the years. No matter how the technology changes, they're still just there to give you bad news. The phone rings it either means someone wants your money or someone you love is dead. I didn't know how to feel when my dad called. I was working on something, my website or a manuscript or shitposting, again I don't remember, I saw his name on the phone screen and knew it meant someone was dead. Was just a matter of who. He followed the script he always uses: "I've got some bad news. Billy died." Only this time I didn't break down, lose my shit, bang on the wall, wander the streets and end up on a bridge, staring down, thinking the best thing to do would be to just fall off it. I maintained my composure. I think I just said "okay."

I don't know if there was an obituary.

## 69 Rules for Novelists

**MalarkeyBooks.com**

December 17, 2018

Jonathan Franzen recently poked his head out of his secret internetless lair in a bunker inside a mountain to publish an essay, for the website *Literary Hub*, called “Jonathan Franzen’s 10 Rules for Writers.” Like all good essays, it was adapted from a book of essays, this one called *The End of the Earth: Essays*. The essay I’m writing is adapted from my own book of essays called *69 Essays: Essays About 69ing*.

### 1.

You don’t have to make your narrator a writer, but you can, and the people who say they’re sick of novels about writers will still have shitloads, boatloads, and even butt-loads of non-narrated-by-a-writer novels to choose from.

### 2.

You don’t have to have an agent, a publicist, an MFA, a friend on the inside, or any kind of friend anywhere, to write good novels, but it helps to have a dog.



3.

I don't really get the present tense, to me it seems overdone, it tends to put me off, but some people seem to really like it. This one is not so much a rule as a parable, which in itself is another parable.

4.

Write in the first person. Or the third person if that works better. Maybe throw in a little second person, I don't know. Is there a fourth person yet? Do that, too.

5.

Snacks.

6.

You probably won't win if you attack them in public, but it's okay to hate people who one-star your books. Feel free to badmouth them to me in private. It's also a great idea to keep a list of their names, not—and I want to be very clear here—*not* so you can assassinate them, do NOT keep a hit list of people who one-star your books, and definitely do not assassinate them, but so you have a ready supply of names for your shittiest characters.

7.

I don't believe in Hell. I do, however, believe that any writer who one-stars another person's novel will go to Hell. It's one thing to trash or criticize it, but one-starring is irredeemable. Might want to double-check your *Goodreads* review of *Purity*.

8.

You don't have to care about all of your characters, but you should care about something. Shit, that one sounded a little too earnest. Sorry.

9.

The trope of the isolated, antisocial writer is romantic, and alluring for awkward, grumpy people like me, but you'll have an easier time booking readings if you have a ton of friends.

10.

Try to get some exercise.

11.

Respond to emails.

12.

Blurbs are overrated.

13.

Don't let people kiss your ass.

14.

If you can find some people you like, hang out with them, joke around with them, but don't be in a clique.

15.

Don't kiss other people's asses.

16.

You should oppose fascism and racism and all forms of bigotry, but not as a marketing strategy.

17.

Read other people's work and let them know when you like it. My email address is alanludd at gmail dot com.

18.

Self-deprecation is still good, even if some people say it's not. One of the reasons people hate Franzen is he comes across in interviews as someone who takes himself really seriously, a trait he shares with many of his more strident detractors.

19.

Some books are long. Some books are short. Some books are somewhere in between. Don't be an asshole about how long a book is. A short novel isn't inherently incomplete and a long-ass novel doesn't mean the author is a pretentious blowhard.

20.

Don't whine about sensitivity readers. Writers who whine about sensitivity readers need to stop being so damn sensitive.

21.

It's easy to make fun of Jonathan Franzen because sometimes he says some incredibly pompous things, but there are worse people, and worse writers, out there, and they deserve to be made fun of, too.

22.

It's okay to recycle tweets (as I'm about to do for the next few bullshit rules). Twitter is not a publisher; it's more like a notebook where you write your deepest, dumbest thoughts even though millions of people have instant access to it.

23.

If you're a writer looking for an agent, you should know that Amy Schumer and the Obamas got all the money in publishing, so keep your regular job and get to know some small press folks.

24.

Readability, likability, and relatability can all get fucked. Congratulations you've completed my MasterClass! Believability, also, can get fucked. Credit to Deborah E. Kennedy for suggesting that one.

25.

Even if your book sucks, practically no one will read it, so go ahead and write it and then nominate it for a bunch of awards and shit.

26.

Before you start a Patreon, consider doing a heist. You've got my email address. Don't think of it as grand larceny. Think of it as a writing grant you received without having to fuck with all the paperwork.

27.

Being offended by cuss words is fucking elitist.

28.

Look, kid, in order to be successful in this business it's important to already be successful.

29.

Be fucking judicious with your fucking swears. Otherfuckingwise you'll fucking sound fucking infuckingaufuckingthentic as fuck.

30.

Think about the world. Everything is political.

31.

Don't steal. Also, this list is neither definitive nor all-inclusive and if you read the whole thing and are like "Why the fuck didn't he talk about

\_\_\_\_\_? What an asshat!," consider that maybe I thought about talking about that thing but didn't because one of the four thousand other writers who made a list of writing rules in response to Franzen's list already talked about it.

32.

Whiteness is not the default.

33.

Destroy your ego.

34.

If you feel like writing culture or some term like that is tilting too far to one extreme, you don't have to put on a fucking sombrero and make a spectacle of yourself by tilting to the other extreme for fuck's sake.

35.

Go ahead and complain about rejections, but don't single out individual agents, editors, or publishers (unless they're doing something exploitative or unethical) and don't send asshole responses to your rejections and especially don't send pictures of your dick or asshole.

36.

More fucking. With this caveat: unless you're going for laughs or trying to get nominated for a Bad Sex Award for the publicity, think really hard and then don't even do it before using a simile or metaphor in a sex scene.

37.

"Kill all your darlings" isn't great advice.

38.

Give people some room to fuck up and be wrong about stuff so they can grow, but if it's time to jump in and try to persuade them to change their mind do it in a way that won't make them hate you and be able to portray themselves as a victim of your bullying. That was advice for anyone, not just novelists, which reminds me don't let me forget to give you my PayPal info.

39.

You deserve to get paid.

40.

There have to be better ways for journals and small publishers to stay afloat than charging submission fees.



41.

Have a writerly name. Franzen was born with a double advantage because all Jonathans are guaranteed at least one book deal and his surname, which originates in Roman-Latin, actually translates to English as “big shot writer dude.”

42.

Use precise language, except when making a list of writing advice, in which case you should use the word “rules” when you really mean “suggestions.”

43.

You can pretty much put anything on a book cover or in your bio. For instance, I am the Man-Booker-nominated author of the internationally most famous Pulitzer-nominated *Invasive Species* series.

44.

If you’re not sure whether it’s okay for you to use the n-word, don’t use it. It’s possible to write racist characters without that word. They might be more authentic anyway, since so many racist people think you can’t actually be racist as long as you don’t use the n-word.

45.

Don't publish stuff before it's ready, but you also don't have time to wait for some magic editor to pluck you from obscurity.

46.

You're going to feel isolated and overlooked, but you can't indulge in self-pity or blame your lack of success or popularity on other people (or on fake-ass bullshit like "misandry in publishing"). It is, however, okay to hex the assholes.

47.

Have fun.

48.

This isn't new advice, but go for walks.

49.

Be respectful and thoughtful and do some real fucking research when you write characters from outside your own culture or experience.

50.

There's a reason why so many novelists are somewhere on the left. Whatever conservative writer you can think of to contradict this rule is more overrated than blurbs, especially if you're thinking of Tom Wolfe.

51.

Regardless of your politics, if you're a cheerleader for capitalism your novels are guaranteed to suck.

52.

Amazon is not on your side.

53.

It's like Beckett said: "Ever tried. Ever fucked up. No matter. Try again. Fuck up again. Fuck up better."

54.

The only thing you should take less seriously than yourself is writing advice.

55.

Online writing doesn't have to be short.

*Rules 56-68 aren't really that important, so we can skip them. This is an online essay after all.*

69.

Page 69 of your novel should have a bit of 69ing.  
That's how you keep the reader—wait for it—  
*comeing* back for more.

## Knowing What to Say

He looked dead. My wife called for help and I went and sat next to him on the sidewalk. There was vomit. He didn't smell good. He was breathing. I asked him if he was okay. I don't know, it was ten years ago, probably, so I don't remember everything, what he was wearing, what he said his name was, what we said word for word. He came around, eventually sat up and started talking to me. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War. He lived now on the streets of Denver. He said he was a writer. I told him I was too, and he told me about the book he was writing. I said I'd like to read it sometime. Wish I could say he came back the next day with his manuscript and it was killer, but he didn't. Anyway how the fuck are you going to write a decent book when you're just trying to survive?

We lived in this beautiful old brick building on Capitol Hill. It was called The Acacia. It wasn't fancy, but it was the type of place that people say has character. We liked it. We had a two-bedroom unit on the second floor that went for around \$850 a month. So I was sitting there talking to this guy, this barely coherent man who I'd found lying in a puddle of his own throwup, when a neighbor heading into the courtyard stopped and told me to call the cops. "Get out of here," he said to the guy. "Don't talk to him," he said to me. "Just call the

cops." I turned my head to look at my neighbor. I didn't know him. I kept to myself. I looked him in the eye and said, "Shut the fuck up."

I don't always know the right thing to say but that time I did.

## How Not to Make Very Much Money Selling Books Online

I couldn't get a job so I decided to sell off some of my books. I'd had a job in New York, working at the City College library, and I would have a job in the fall, teaching freshman composition at City College while finishing my degree. But I was at home in Denver for the summer, jobless. It has never been easy for me to find a job—for a plethora of reasons. I'm lazy. I have an English degree (two now). I hate authority. I've been known, on principle, to refuse to consent to a drug test, even though I don't use drugs. I have a fairly serious phobia about calling people on the telephone. (Used to have. I've sort of got over it now, after a decade of standing in front of a classroom of strangers and however many months of being my own contractor building a house and a garage, ordering supplies over the phone, calling around trying to find out who, if anyone, can even get any 8x8s at a time like this.) I also have a phobia about answering the phone. I'm usually a good liar, but I can't come up with a good answer to the question of why I want to work for whatever company it is to which I'm applying for a job. "I need money, you dumb bastard," is, of course, the honest answer, and it's usually the only thing I can think of when I'm asked that question. The first job for which I applied after I graduated from the

University of Colorado was at some sports marketing firm. My answer to that question was, "I don't want to do something that's going to suck out my soul." I wound up working as a seasonal cashier at Target, although I quit—or was technically terminated after a no-call-no-show—a few months later, shortly after my supervisor told me they wanted to keep me on permanently. I was worried about my soul. I did apply with a staffing agency in Denver, but they never got back to me. I know you're supposed to follow up on things like that. I have a number of skills and talents. I'm a very good speller, for instance, and I can drive a golf ball more than two-hundred-seventy yards. Just try my black bean tacos. But following up on things is not my forte. I know "forte" is technically pronounced as one syllable, just like fort, but I still pronounce it with an accented "e" the way God intended.

I also have this lapsed-Catholic guilt complex that would have made it hard for me to start a new job, go through all the training, and then quit a few weeks later, since I was due back in New York by August 23, so while I sat at home wondering what I could do for money—play music on the street, work up the nerve to stand at some day-labor drop point, walk up to Taco Bell—I began thinning my library in order to make some payments. It would be an overstatement to say this was a painful process. I can't really say that it pained me, for example, to part with *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*, by Ali Ansari, or *The Lovely*



*Bones*. The former, which I probably would have never read, I found on the paper line when I worked in the on-campus recycling center at the University of Colorado (that was a good gig), and the latter, which I also probably would have never read, I found in the giveaway corner down in the basement of my apartment building. Nevertheless, this summer-long book divestment was unpleasant. Most things we do for money are unpleasant.

The first books to go were *Seventeenth-Century British Poetry, 1603-1660*, a Norton anthology edited by John P. Rumrich (I envy his surname) and Gregory Chaplin, and *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, edited by David Levering Lewis. They brought in \$12. This was at the end of May, when I still harbored illusions about temporary work. Toward the end of June, when I was a little more enlightened, I started selling in earnest. I spent hours on the websites of Powell's, Abe Books, and eCampus, typing in ISBN numbers. I sold *Introduction to Logic and Critical Thinking* by Merrilee H. Salmon. I would have preferred to hold on to it, but money was a thing I needed, and the book was a thing that was worth \$25, so it was valid to sell it. I got rid of a couple of old French textbooks that I figured were worth nothing but wound up fetching \$30, and I reluctantly parted with *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz.

Selling your books to online booksellers is convenient, but these booksellers take their sweet-

ass time cutting the checks. It would have been much faster to sell them at a physical bookstore, and I would, deep down, have preferred to do it that way, but I didn't want to lug a heavy bag of books down to a store only to lug a slightly less heavy bag of unsold books back home. I could have gone down there every day, carrying a small load, but a book-selling visit to the bookstore is something that requires a significant amount of mustered courage, which I could not supply on a daily basis. (Looking back on this essay, which I wrote a few months after I got back to New York, and significantly revised a few years later with the thought that maybe I'd actually get it published sometime, I feel like I should have been honest and said, in addition to all these other reasons I'm also a lazy piece of shit. Anyway it's true and I'm saying it now, all these years later.) My neighborhood bookstore in Denver was Kilgore's, on Thirteenth Avenue. On the Kilgore's website the proprietors note that if they decline to accept a book it doesn't mean they dislike you personally, but that's not how it felt when I tried to sell them my duplicate copy of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The guy at the shop was very nice about it, but no one likes rejection, even when it's delivered with a smile. It was frustrating to find out that no one—not Powell's, not Abe Books—would buy *The Plot Against America*, but at least I didn't walk away from my computer feeling like someone who's going stag to the prom.

Books depreciate in value worse than cars. I don't understand how a book like *The Plot Against America* could have been worth \$26 in 2004 and nothing in 2010. I'm sure there's some kind of asinine economic explanation, but I don't much care what it is. I guess that's why I couldn't land a job in publishing.

The time period—it runs between a nanosecond and a few seconds—between the pressing of “Get quote” and the moment when the quote appears is one of irrational anxiety and anticipation. There's a lot of groaning and foot-tapping. There were moments when I was enraged to find no one wanted my book, like *Media & Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*. I paid \$90 for it, and two years later it was worth \$0.06 on Amazon. Bastards! Blood should be coursing through the streets, drowning the textbook publishers. There were times when I was relieved to be told, “We are not currently buying this title.” I didn't really want to sell *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire. I still haven't read it, and I may never get around to it, but it would feel wrong to get rid of that book because I bought it, along with a cane, for a dollar at an antique store in rural Missouri, and I really like the notion that there might be a reader of revolutionary texts in rural Missouri, and I feel like, as long as I hold on to that book, I have some sort of kinship with that revolutionary reader.

There were occasional treats, like the time I sold the copy of *femalia*, by Joani Blank, I found in a box on the sidewalk in south Boulder. *femalia* is

published by Down There Press out of San Francisco. If this book were a reality show it would be *The Real Vulvas of San Francisco*. I say vulvas because the author or editor hopes “that *femalia* has some influence on the unfortunate habit that most people have of calling a woman’s vulva her vagina.” It has, but still, vulva, vagina, whatever you call it, this book is full of close-up pictures of what Chaucer called the belle chose. The book might make some people uncomfortable, but I think it’s fascinating. All vulvas are made of the same parts, but, as with faces (how many ways can you arrange a mouth, a nose, and a pair of eyes? A hell of a lot, is the answer), the variety is surprising and a little humbling. And how did Blank get all those people to let her print photographs of their vulvas? Is there a companion book called *malia* out there? A book like this makes you ask the fundamental question: would I let an editor take a picture of my genitals? I don’t think I could do that—certainly not for under \$500. Well, make an offer. We’ll talk. I can’t believe someone almost threw *femalia* away. Fucking chauvinists. Now I’m upset that I sold it. On to my point: I thought there was no way it would sell, and I didn’t remotely want to part with it, but I tried it and was shocked to discover that Abe Books was offering \$13 for it. These moments are rare, and they don’t make up for the constant disappointment. Even when they are buying a particular title, they almost never offer what you think the book is worth. I was willing, grudgingly, to part with *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale*,

but not for \$3, but then I reached a point where I needed \$3.30 to reach the \$15 minimum required by Abe Books. I would have, again grudgingly, parted with *The Coquette* by Hannah W. Foster, but they didn't want it; I tried *Paradise* by Toni Morrison, and then *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel and *The Woman at Otowi Crossing* by Frank Waters, but they didn't want any of those, and they didn't want *We Were the Mulvaneys* or *The Tattooed Girl* or *The Falls*, and I can't blame them. They would have given me \$1.50 for *Ramona*, by Helen Hunt Jackson, which I know I'll probably never read again, but \$1.50? So *Maus I* was worth \$3, and there was a hardback dictionary that was worth a couple bucks. I didn't want to let it go at that price, but I still had the tenth edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and the fourth edition of *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, as well as online access courtesy of The City College of New York to the OED. I decided to let *Maus I* go with the understanding that I would pick up a new copy if I ever have a disposable income. Alternatively, if I'm ever around during a riot I'll loot a Barnes & Noble.

I belong to a rising class of writers who don't get paid for what they write. I like to think I'm at the vanguard of that class, but I'm a pretty slow walker, and I tend to get distracted by things like squirrels and flowers, so I'm probably somewhere near the back, tying my shoelaces. I like not getting paid. It gives me total freedom to, you know, write whatever the fuck I want, but it also leaves me in constant need of money. Like Jesus, I don't like

money. I understand that it's a "necessary evil," but I'm not really sold on the whole arrangement. It's all just paper and metal. Anyway, here's how my numbers crunched. I sold a total of forty-one books for \$188.03, for a mean price of \$4.59 per book. I got the most from eCampus, which paid me \$90.50 for eleven books, or \$8.23 per book. Abe Books paid, on average, \$3.75 per book, and Powell's paid only \$2.14 per book. "Death to Powell's!" you might be chanting, but bear in mind that the numbers for eCampus are skewed by the \$25 logic book and a couple other big-ticket textbooks. It doesn't matter where you sell them or how much you're paid, when you sell your books you always come out feeling screwed.

One of my City College colleagues made extra cash by requesting instructor copies of textbooks and selling them online. The antisocial reviler of textbook publishers in me would love to do that; the former Catholic school student won't let me. My wife could have married some conscienceless, well-dressed money-maker, but then little George wouldn't be nearly as good-humored or good-looking as he is, and he'd probably be named Blake or Cory or Carter. He's handsome enough to hire out as a baby model, but the baby model world is plagued by drug abuse and eating disorders, to say nothing of the egos, and we want him to be happy, not rich. "Money is nothing," baby, as your namesake wrote; "character, capacity, and conduct are everything." (Oscar wasn't born yet, when this paragraph was inserted during the big revision of

2012, but I'd like to point out that he is very handsome, too. Two very handsome boys, with big hearts. They are the best. Love you guys.) My wife is a social worker, and I'm a freelance proofreader/indie writer who has run out of salable books (by salable books I mean books I'm willing to sell), so we'll always be hard up, more or less. "There are degrees in being hard up," wrote Jerome K. Jerome. "We are all hard up, more or less—most of us more. Some are hard up for a thousand pounds; some for a shilling. Just at this moment I am hard up myself for a fiver." With inflation and the exchange rate, that works out to roughly \$596. Checks are welcome.

Note to the reader: when I was selling books I was also making extra money writing meaningless articles for a freelance copywriting website. Can't remember the name of it. I wrote this essay in 2010, when I was writing (for free) for *Bookslut*, and the editor there blanked me, didn't even say no to this piece, just acted like I never emailed it to him. Baller move, in retrospect. Anyway I'm too lazy to look up the exchange rate eleven years later. We can call it an even \$600. My venmo is the same as my twitter handle.

Mental Hellness

*Neutral Spaces*

March 24, 2021

I was really feeling like hot shit mental-health-wise but the pandemic took care of that. Imagine the hubris of me, just a few years ago, thinking I don't get depressed at Christmas anymore, I must be better. Shit.

I probably had a panic attack last week. Anxiety attack. Pandemic attack. Might have been the week before. I've lost track. I was trying to get the kids to bed. I was lying on the floor in their room, watching the underneath of the top bunk bed heave and bend as my oldest son got himself situated. He's moving around making sure his water bottles are there. He's got a whole library up there with him and has to make sure all the titles he might need are there and easily accessible. Has to make sure all his stuffies are there. And as he does this I'm watching the narrow wood struts underneath his mattress bend. My other son was in the bathroom still, getting ready, getting medicine on his arms. He has recently developed this dry skin situation where he scratched so much he made little wounds and we're putting medicine on it and wrapping them in gauze at night. He likes the way my wife does it so I let her do it and I was just waiting for him to come in and get in his bed and I was just sure if I let that happen he'd get



smooshed. I was sitting there watching those little boards bend and I was freaking out. Telling myself to stop, that it was fine, that G squirmed like that every night and the bed was fine, it wasn't going to break or fall, but none of that helped. The image of the bed falling was seared into my brain. They came in and I told my wife I was worried about the bed, that maybe O should sleep in our room that night and I could reinforce the bed later, and she thought I was being paranoid and I tried to explain myself but ended up instead just having a panic attack type thing. I was in there lying on the floor in the same spot where G had lain when he had his seizure, struggling to catch my breath, embarrassed to know that my kids were seeing me freak out over fear of a bunk bed falling, afraid I was going to make them freak out.

My wife's job scares me. She has to go into people's homes. To help them. To connect them to resources. She likes it but if I think about it too much it makes me worry. We live in a fucking hellworld. I worry about my kids all the time. The socialization they're missing out on, how much stress this year has caused them. What the world will be like when they're grown. I've talked to parents who feel guilty over bringing children into this hellworld. I have no regrets. My kids are my happiness, like they're what make me okay, the reason I don't get depressed at Christmas anymore, with the exception of this past pandemic Christmas I guess. They bring so much joy and beauty to this world. They have such big hearts and kind souls. I

could never feel guilty for bringing them into this world but I have to teach them how live in it and that fucking scares me sometimes. How to be good, helpful people in a world full of selfish, dangerous people. How to grow food and build shelter and treat water. How to know when to run and when to fight. This year was just a preview of the hell that's coming but I can't tell them that. I can't even think that.

The pandemic isn't over but people are acting like it's over to the point where the mass shootings are back. Earlier this week ten people were killed at the grocery store my wife and I used to ride our bikes to every Friday when we lived in Boulder. We would go rent movies at Movie Gallery and get groceries and ride home. Before we had kids. Before we were even married. Before all the video stores closed, that's how long ago it was. It's been on my mind I guess. Just when it's getting close to being safe to go the fucking grocery store.

It's been a hard year and I just think how like seven years from now we might look back and think how easy we had it.

My wife thinks we should all go to therapy, and maybe she's right, but, like, how?

In the end I slept in the bottom bunk that night and the top one didn't fall on me. The next day I put some more boards underneath the mattress and it's fine, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.

Shoal Creek

Twitter

June 7, 2021

Was running down by the creek, watching the mist floating up off the water, and I was like damn that's beautiful, and when I got closer it was just some folks in inner tubes smoking weed, and I was like damn that's beautiful.

Frontline

*Neutral Spaces*

May 4, 2019

We give Charlie frontline. You spread his fur apart, clear a little spot between his shoulder blades once a month and pour it on and it makes ticks not want to bite him. But ticks are like lawyers, like Catholics, experts at identifying loopholes and then exploiting them. I can compare Catholics to ticks because I'm one, even if I don't go to mass or whatever. I was in public school in Texas for like a year and a half but aside from that brief period I went to Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. The ticks don't bite Charlie but they use him like a taxi. He goes running through the woods and the tall grass while my wife and kids and I are working on the house in our pasture/yard/construction site. He comes back with ticks on him and since they can't do anything to him they come looking for us. My wife will say "How the fuck was there a tick in my underwear when I didn't leave the site at all today?" And then she'll remember. Charlie. Our little tick taxi. I only mention this at all because it feels like such a metaphor. The parable of the tick taxi.

June 10

June 9, 2021

I looked out my window this morning and there was a deer in the neighbors' yard. We call the space behind their house The Hidden Woods. It's just a strip of undeveloped land where the power lines go through between two streets but it's a good place for deer and feral cats to hang out. And kids, before the weather got warm and the grass got high. I smiled when I saw the deer, as common as they are it's still always a pleasure to see them. We'll see so many deer in the years to come. We'll be sitting on the back deck drinking coffee and they'll go prancing through the yard on the way to the creek. Got to build a deck first. And a house. We're halfway through the foundation, which is a pier and beam. The piers are in, ton of work but we did it, Virg and me, with some help from my dad and the kids, and as I write this I'm waiting for a call from the trucking company that's bringing our pressure-treated 8x8s out to the place, and then I'm going to get the kids in the car and head up and we're going to build a goddamn house. I grabbed a poptart and when I looked out the window again there was a black cat standing next to the deer. I wanted to take a picture but it would have looked garbage. Lucky Charlie didn't see. He would have lost his mind.

I turned forty this year and all I do now is think about death. This is a slight exaggeration. It makes me mad, knowing I'll die one day, even if it's a hundred years from now which it fucking better be at least that much, knowing my kids will do things I won't get to see, will have lives I won't be a part of. Seems like everyone down here, of an age to have grown kids, has kids who won't even talk to them, and it breaks my heart. I can't even imagine. What a stupid way to live.

The day I turned forty was the day before my oldest son had his seizure. Nearly four months have passed, which saying that I can't even believe it. I need time to slow down but everyone says the older you get the faster it goes. He's good. He's doing great.

Tomorrow is my sister's birthday. She should be thirty-three. Is my math wrong? How can that be true? Doesn't feel like it's been that long. Soon she'll have been gone for as long as she was alive. She should be grown and married and have cute little kids now. My kids don't get to know their aunt, they've been robbed of their cousins. She was only seventeen. Stepsister actually but it never mattered. When she was killed I was in Vancouver, hungover, on my way to Alaska. I wonder if I'll ever make it to Alaska. My dad called and said she'd been hurt. I asked if she was okay, if she was in the hospital. "She's alive though," I remember saying. Something to that effect. And he had to say no.

I was back in that hotel room the night of the seizure, getting a bag of clothes ready to take to George in the hospital, grabbing his favorite stuffies, debating over when to wake Oscar up, and I was texting my wife, saying "How is George?" and when a few minutes went by and there was no response I started freaking out. Followed up with "He's okay right? Tell me he's okay." Followed up a few minutes later with "Virginia???" Finally she wrote back that he was okay. She'd been in the room with him when he was getting a CT scan, couldn't reply at the time. Which I knew. Rationally I knew but I couldn't help freaking out a little bit. This essay is all over the place because so am I.

My twenties were rough, but at least I got to have them. I drank way too much and was depressed all the time and I fucked everything up at every opportunity, but I guess not irrevocably. And now my life is so beautiful. If I could do my life over I would be less of a fuckup and I'd have kids when I was younger, like twenty-five instead of thirty, so I'd be able to spend more time on this earth with them. And their kids and grandkids. I know the world's going to hell but that's all I want.

Origins

*Neutral Spaces*

March 4, 2021

In junior year I wrote an essay for English class about how everyone I loved had died from Marfan syndrome. I'm being dramatic. My uncle died when he was nineteen. He was helping a neighbor and his heart gave out. And my grandma died when she was sixty. I think she was just sitting in her chair. Of course her heart was already broken from Robbie dying. She kept a diary through most of her life. My aunt has the box with all the diaries. Dozens of them. It's kind of boring stuff telling about her day-to-day life. She did the laundry. She called a friend. She made cookies. I'd like to look through them again and see what she wrote after she broke her arm trying to jump off the roof. The ladder had fallen and no one was home to put it back up for her. At the hospital she had a room on the second floor and gramps said to the doctor, "Watch out for this one. She's a jumper." The saddest thing I've ever read is in the last diary. Dated September 7, 1988. In my grandfather's handwriting it just says "Mariruth died this morning." I was seven. At the time I wrote the essay they were the only ones who had actually died from Marfan but several people in my family had it. My aunt. My other uncle. All my cousins on my mom's side except for one. Holly would die a



couple years later at seventeen. I thought my teacher was going to love this essay. He liked everything else I wrote. I poured my heart into it. I let myself be vulnerable. He gave me a B. I had written this elaborate metaphor how a monster had destroyed my family and the monster was Marfan and he thought it was overwrought. I don't remember what he actually said but it amounted to him thinking it was overwrought. Cheap and cloying and all that shit and I'm sure it was. I'd let some girls in the class read the essay, though, and they all loved it so I didn't actually give a shit what my teacher thought.

Why Do We Do This

*Unagented Trash*

March 31, 2021

My uncle used to race cars. Dirt tracks down in Texas and Oklahoma. Occasionally I'd get to go watch a race. He never won. There was never a chance he would win. I never heard anyone say maybe tonight will be the night. It was just something he did, it wasn't going to lead to anything or make him any money. Nobody seemed to judge him or tell him he was wasting his time. His kids thought it was cool. I thought it was cool. His wife, my aunt, my dad's half-sister, thought it was cool. He never seemed despondent or bitter when he lost a race.

I don't know why he stopped, or even when. I still think it was cool.

Alan Good is a writer and freelance proofreader. His work has been published in *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Atticus Review*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, to name a few. He is the print editor at Malarkey Books and also runs the extremely small press Death of Print. Educated at the University of Colorado in Boulder and The City College of New York, he taught writing at the Community College of Denver for nearly ten years. He lives in the country with his wife and children. His other books are *The War on Xmas* and *The Sun Still Shines on a Dog's Ass*.

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## Hidden Track

I couldn't fall asleep lying on my side, so I laid on my back and was immediately met by the thought that I'd spend millions of years in that position, inside the ground, technically much less time than that of course, depending on how long it takes the earth to turn me into dust, so I rolled back on my side.



We owe each other everything.